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OR,

The Brimstone Band's Blot-Out.

BY COLONEL PRENTISS INGRAHAM.

CHAPTER I.

LOST AND WON.

"You have asked me for my love, Edmund Allyn, and I tell I you have no love to give; for my heart is not my own."

"It is Douglass Dean's—"

"Yes, wholly."

"And he is under sentence of death, for murder."

"True; yet I love him for all that. The shadow upon his life deepens my love for him."

"Will you marry me and let me teach you to love me, Irma?"

"You could never do that, for my heart once given, the gift is irrevocable."

"I will risk it, if you will become my wife."

"STAND BACK, I SAY! THE CHIEF SHALL NOT HANG!" CRIED THE BRAVE GIRL.

"You are willing to take a loveless wife, Edmund Allyn?"

And the woman seemed to be deeply moved at her question.

"Yes; in your case."

"Then I will marry you upon certain conditions."

"You have but to name them, for I accept beforehand."

"Remember, mine is a strange nature, Edmund Allyn, and love is everything to me. If I lost the one I loved, then I could welcome forgetfulness in death with absolute joy. Do you heed what I say?"

"Yes," he answered, in a low tone, and her words came back to him afterward with a vivid understanding of their meaning.

"Well, listen to me, and lose not a single word."

"I am all attention, Irma."

"The law has said that Douglass Dean murdered and robbed Major Massey three months ago to-night. It was proven, so all believed, only I do not agree with the verdict of the jury; yet, if he did do so, I love him still, guilty or innocent."

"Now he is sentenced to be hanged two weeks from to-day. I had intended marrying him in prison, becoming the wife of a man under the very shadow of the gallows; but I wish Douglass to live, and I now tell you that, as you are willing to take a loveless bride, if you will save him and aid him to escape I will become your wife three days after he is free!"

"Do you mean this, Irma Enders?" eagerly asked the man.

"I do."

"Upon your honor?"

"Yes."

"You swear it?"

"I will."

"Then, I swear to set Douglass Dean free within the week. Here, hold out your hand."

She silently obeyed, and, drawing from his own finger a splendid ruby ring, set in a massive band of solid gold, he slipped it upon her wedding finger.

She turned very pale as he did so, but did not utter a word, while he said, hoarsely:

"That is the pledge, Irma, and binds you to me. It is my luck ring, for never did I undertake aught while wearing it, that I did not win."

"See, I have won this game with you, and I'll teach you to love me. You know me as I am, even as the world paints me; a wild, reckless fellow, who squandered an inheritance, and is now a gentleman gambler."

"That ring has won gold for me, and it will continue to do so. It has now won you. Good-by, and expect to hear, within the week, that Douglass Dean has escaped the gallows."

"I will hope," the girl said, softly, and the man bent over, pressed a kiss upon the hand that wore the ruby ring, and then walked rapidly out of the parlor.

She watched him as he descended the piazza steps, mount his horse in the yard and dash away.

Then she rose, but only to totter, reel and sink upon the floor in a deep faint.

She had sold herself for her lover's life!

Irma Enders was a beautiful girl, and one with a history. She had been found, half-starved and wounded, lying in a thicket near a burned frontier home, when she was but twelve years of age.

The army officer who found her, heard her pitiful story of how her parents and little sister and brother had been murdered by a band of marauders, and she too had been left for dead.

Tenderly she was cared for and nursed back to life and health, while, having no children of his own, the good-hearted officer had adopted her and taken her to his wife, whose home was in the East.

Irma was an extraordinary child, very beautiful in face and form, and a rare genius for one so young, while her character was lovable in the extreme.

She had told her adopted parents that her father had once been rich, and she remembered, when a very little girl, how they had traveled in Europe, and she had had a French nurse with pretty caps to walk after her.

But adversity had come upon her father, poverty had followed, and he had sought a home on the far frontier, where all had met such a dread fate except herself.

Major Enders was not a rich man, but he had a pleasant home in the outskirts of an Eastern city, and every advantage was bestowed upon little Irma, by his wife and himself, and they loved her as dearly as if she had been their own child.

Thus she grew up to the age of nineteen, a beautiful, accomplished girl, an ideal among women, the idol of men and a belle in society.

Major Enders had retired from the army, on account of wounds received, when Irma was seventeen, and living at home it was a very happy trio that dwelt in that cottage near the city.

But a shadow fell upon Irma's life, for she had learned to love a man who was a mystery to all who knew him. He had come to the

town as a teacher, and, excepting that he was well educated, had traveled extensively and was a Southerner, or claimed to be, nothing was known of Douglass Dean.

His manners were courtly, yet somewhat stern, and there was a look in his blue eyes that men could not read, while they contrasted strangely with his jet-black hair.

He had performed prodigies of valor one night, when the "Young Ladies' Academy" had caught fire, and had risked his life time and again to save the pupils from death.

Irma Enders was a scholar there, going home every Friday night until Monday, and when all believed her lost beyond all hope, Douglass Dean had dashed into the building again, and reappeared with her in his arms.

It was weeks before he got over that night's brave but fearful work, but he had become a hero of heroes, and more, he had won Irma Enders's heart.

She graduated soon after, and at once became a reigning belle, but she loved Douglass Dean, and it was whispered about that they were engaged, when the community were startled by the arrest of her lover for murder, and his trial, conviction and sentence soon followed.

Then it was that another lover, thrice discarded by her, Edmund Allyn, appeared more earnest in his efforts to win the beautiful girl.

Of good family, handsome, and a man who had squandered his inheritance and turned gambler, Edmund Allyn was yet one upon whom society could not turn its back, and that he in the end won Irma Enders under a pledge has been seen.

Let the sequel show how stranger than fiction are the stern realities of life.

CHAPTER II. THE CRIMSON CLEW.

In the vicinity of the city, wherein lived Irma Enders, dwelt an old bachelor by the name of Matthew Massey.

He had served in the Mexican War and had won the rank of major; but, tiring of military service, he had given up the life of a soldier for that of a merchant, and soon was the possessor of a handsome fortune.

Retiring from business, he bought a pretty home a couple of miles from the city, and there lived alone, excepting for the presence of two servants, a man and his wife, who looked to his comfort.

The major lived well, had his horse and buggy, and passed his time between his library and his sports, for he hunted and fished a great deal.

Rumor had it that the major always kept his money, from rents and interest on bonds, in his home until the first day of the year, when he would go in and bank or invest his savings from his income.

Perhaps it was this that cost the old man his life, one dark and stormy night, some months prior to the opening of this story.

His two servants had taken the buggy, to drive into town and pass the night with a dying child, and the major was alone.

A glass of hot toddy was upon the table at his elbow, a fire burned in the large chimney-place, and the major was enjoying his comfort and his papers, when a knock startled him.

Going to the front door, he admitted a form enveloped in a storm-coat and hat, and Major Massey started back as he beheld a stranger, for he had supposed it to be his old servants returning.

"Major Massey?" said the visitor, politely.

"Yes, sir, Massey is my name; what might yours be?"

"Dean, sir—Douglass Dean."

"Ah! I have heard of you, sir, and of your heroism in the school-house fire. You are a brave man, Mr. Dean; but come in and say why I am indebted to you for this call."

The major's manner was brusque, but not unkind, and he meant to be kind, only the world, it was said, had not been full of happiness for him, for in early life he had loved and lost.

The visitor laid aside his storm-coat and hat, and followed Major Massey into his cozy library, where another log was thrown upon the fire, and a second glass gotten to give a toddy to the guest.

The latter seemed nervous and ill at ease, for his face was very pale and wore a stern expression, and of resolve to do some act that required nerve to execute it.

"Now, sir?" and the major handed over the toddy, which the visitor dashed off at once, as though he needed it to brace his nerves.

For the first time the major felt nervous, as he glanced at his visitor. He saw a handsome man, but one who was under some strong excitement, and, wishing to be alone again, he said:

"Now, sir, tell me how I can serve you?"

"Very quickly will I, sir, and it will be to your interest to do so at once and save time, and misfortune to yourself."

The major arched his brows, but said nothing, and the caller resumed:

"You were in the Mexican war, and my father was your rival for the hand of a lovely girl, the daughter of a Texan ranchero."

"This was in 'Forty-four. Father won her,

and, in revenge, you lured him into a game of cards soon after his marriage, and won from him fifteen thousand dollars, all he had."

"Those cards you played with were marked, so you defrauded him of that money and came here and made it the foundation of the large fortune you now possess."

"It is false, sir, false! I did play with your father, if you are the son of Douglass Dean, and won his money, and it was a sweet revenge when he had, by false representations cheated me out of her who should have been my wife; but, it was no case of fraud, sir, and I will not—"

"Hold, old man! I am no fool to come here unprepared. The facts are as I have stated, and I have come here to get from you the amount you cheated my father out of, and I will have it, with full interest to date on the whole amount."

"You threaten me, you dare—"

"I do threaten, and the money I need, I must have, I will have, or I will kill you and take it from your safe yonder."

With a cry of rage Major Massey sprung to his feet, as though to rush upon his visitor, when there came the sharp crack of a revolver, and, with a groan the old man sunk upon the floor, his life-blood staining the carpet.

"He brought it upon himself, for he should have seen that I was a man upon the very verge of desperation, for that money I must have."

So said the murderer, and he bent over the form, placed his hand over the heart, then looked into the face, white and stern.

As though satisfied that his work had been well done, he took from the pocket of his victim a bunch of keys, and, going to the safe, opened it.

There was money there in plenty, gold, silver and bank-notes. He took up package after package and thrust them into his pocket, until he grimly muttered:

"That is enough to cover the amount. Now to depart and leave no trace of my identity behind, for no one will suspect me."

Soon after he left the room, drew on his storm-coat and hat, walked out of the house into the storm, and, mounting his waiting horse, rode on toward the town.

The sun was rising when the two old servants came, and while the man went to the stable to put up the horse, his wife entered the house and made her way to the library to see if the master was up and to tell him that their child was better.

Opening the door, a startling sight met the woman's gaze.

There, upon the floor, lying face downward over a low foot-stool, was Major Massey, dead, but one hand rested upon a newspaper upon which had been written with the index finger of the right hand, and with his own blood serving as ink:

"I was shot here and robbed by Douglass Dean last night."

"I have not strength to call for help—but before I die, I do—"

There was no more, but the crimson clew was sufficient to condemn, and the officers of the law soon arrested Douglass Dean.

He was asleep in his rooms in town, his horse was saddle-stained and muddy, and there was every evidence that he had been out during the night on horseback.

Then, too, his revolver had one chamber empty, and the bullet taken from the body of Major Massey fitted the weapon.

Could better evidence of guilt be needed to convict?

No one thought of his innocence, and he admitted that he had been to a neighboring town and returned by the major's home about midnight.

He pleaded "Not guilty," yet, though the money taken was not found on him or about his rooms, the jury brought in a verdict according to the crimson clew left by the dying man, and Douglass Dean was sentenced to the gallows.

Only one person in all that community believed in his innocence, and that one was Irma Enders.

CHAPTER III.

ONE PLEDGE KEPT, ANOTHER BROKEN.

PACING the floor of his cell, as far as his clanking chains allowed him to go, and alternately turning from the dismal interior to gaze through the grated window out over a scene of beauty, a flowing river, green hills afar off, dotted with homes and winding roads, Douglass Dean's thoughts were upon the cruel present, the bitter past, the hopeless future.

He was a man of fine physique, a courtly gentleman in appearance, hardly appearing like one to do a deed of murder to get gold; but he knew that there was no hope for him, for new trials had been refused, the proof against him seemingly was conclusive. The victim had been left for dead, but the old man had rallied, and, unable to rise, had dipped his finger in the crimson pool upon the floor, and with the blood for ink had written the story of his death.

Suddenly the door opened, and a visitor was admitted.

He was scarcely less pale than the doomed man, and his voice quivered as he spoke:

"I have come to have a talk with you, Mr. Dean."

"To rejoice before me that, while I hang, you, my rival, will now win the woman who was pledged to me?"

"You are severe, Mr. Dean. But I come here with no such purpose; my purpose is rather to serve you."

"No man can serve me now."

"You are mistaken; it is in my power to do so."

"In what way?"

"To save you from the hangman."

Dean started, and demanded, quickly:

"Can you do this?"

"I can."

"How?"

"By bribery, of course, and I am willing to pay the price of the two men who can be bought, the assistant jailer and the gatekeeper."

"I can release you the second night after to-night, and will supply you with the means of escape."

"May I ask if you have any money?"

"No. The lawyers got my last dollar, and even what I had in my rooms I sold to pay the expenses of my trial."

"Well, I will give you one thousand dollars and an outfit for your flight. It will cost about three times that sum to purchase the two men I spoke of, so you will be my debtor for your life and for the four thousand dollars I shall advance. But you can cancel this debt by doing as I say."

"Well, sir?"

"Life is dear to you, is it not?"

"Very."

"Dearer than all else?"

"Yes, whose life is not?"

"Then love is a secondary consideration?"

"Ah! I am to leave the field clear to you to win Miss Enders?"

"You are to give me your pledge never to see, or speak with Miss Enders again!"

"I give the pledge, sir, if you give me my freedom from this durance vile."

"I will do so within forty-eight hours; but, remember, if I know of your coming East, or communicating with Miss Enders again, I shall hand you over once more to the law officers."

"So be it, sir."

"Then I will tell you my plot, Mr. Dean, and leave you."

For some time the two men talked in a low tone, but, at length, Edmund Allyn took his leave, and the face of Douglass Dean wore a different look from what it had, half an hour before.

Writing a few lines in cipher he called to the watchman, and taking from his pocket a roll of money, handed him the note and a ten-dollar bill.

"My man, when you go off duty to-night, bear this note to its address, and give it only into the hands of the one whose name is here. This bill will pay you for your services."

"Thank you, sir. I will do it, for a note can do no harm," replied the watchman, and the prisoner's face wore a peculiar look as he turned again to the window.

The third day after the city was startled by the tidings that Douglass Dean had escaped from jail.

His manner of doing so was soon known, for the assistant jailer was missing. This, of course, pointed to bribery, especially as the gatekeeper stated that the assistant had passed out at night with an old gentleman, who, he said, had been visiting Douglass Dean.

Not a clew could be found to the fugitive's whereabouts. Detectives were set upon the track to discover what they could, while large rewards were offered for the return of the prisoner, dead or alive.

Two days later another startling piece of news thrilled the town, for the death was reported by drowning, of Irma Enders, the reigning belle of the community!

She had been out for a late afternoon ride on horseback; a thunder-storm had come up; torrents of rain had swept away the bridge across the stream near her home; her horse had been found, the next morning, dead among the debris of the bridge, lodged upon rocks below, and the body of the rider was searched for everywhere, but without success.

Major Enders and his wife were inconsolable, and hundreds of sympathizing friends joined in the search for the missing girl.

Among these was Edmund Allyn, who spent his money lavishly to urge on the search, while those who gazed into his haggard, grief-stamped face, saw that he really suffered most deeply.

Days passed. The body was not found, and hope that it ever would be was abandoned by all save one, Edmund Allyn. From dawn to darkness he rode along the river-banks, still searching for the beautiful dead, and not until the truth was forced upon him, that the form of the drowned girl had been swept far away

by the fierce torrent, and would never more be seen, did he give up the quest.

When at last he yielded to the inevitable, he returned to his old-time life, living faster and more reckless than ever, gambling more daringly.

Then, one night, he shot dead, at the table, one who had called him a "card-sharp"; but effected his escape, and rumor said that he had found a refuge from the law among the mining-camps of the frontier.

CHAPTER IV.

THE CAPTIVE CHIEF.

THE Overland coach drew up to a group of cabins one morning, some two weeks after the flight of Douglass Dean. In it were but two passengers, a man and a woman.

The halting-place was known as Valley City. It was the breakfast station and relay-house where the horses were changed for another sharp drive over the mountains.

That same evening there was considerable excitement in Valley City when the night-coach rolled in. The denizens of the town were grouped about the door of the "Palace Hotel," as a large cabin was named, and angry cries, wild gestures, and oaths, were heard upon all sides.

The cause of this disturbance was an Indian chief, who, securely bound hand and foot, also had about his neck a lariat, the other end of which was thrown over the limb of a tree near by.

The Indian was silent, unmoved by his peril, and held himself proudly erect, while he looked defiantly into the faces of his captors.

That he was a chief his feather head-dress and strings of bear-claws showed, while to his belt hung a number of scalps of various-hued hair, some short, some long, and others apparently torn from the heads of children.

The Indian's hair was white, and his face showed that he had left behind him four-score years of life, but, for all that, his physique was a superb one, and he showed strength and activity not to be expected from one of his age.

"Swing ther red dog up, pards, and give Nat Lee and ther pilgrims in ther old hearse a chance ter see him kick," cried the ringleader, as Nat Lee, the driver, drew rein before the Palace Hotel.

"This shall not be!" came in a clear, firm voice, and with a bound a woman sprung from the coach to the side of the doomed man. "You shall not hang this poor old man," she continued, turning her brilliant, flashing eyes upon the crowd, who seemed fairly dumfounded at her act and words.

At least one had the nerve to speak, and he said, apologetically:

"Pardon, miss, but he are a Injun."

"An Indian? And is that why you would murder him?"

The answer came frankly and to the point:

"Yas, miss."

"What has he done that you would kill him?"

"He's a Injun, miss, and a Injun are a snake and should be scotched w'en ye catches him, yer see."

"You are going to hang him upon general principles, then?"

"No, miss; we is goin' ter hang him upon thet tree, and ther general don't know nothin' about it," replied the borderman, to whom "general principles" was quite a stranger.

"Where did you capture him?"

"We jumped him, miss, last night, down in ther valley, and so kept him over ter hang this mornin'."

"Who is he?"

"Ther reddest-handed Sioux on ther border, and head medicine-chief o' ther Ogalalls, fer he are old Red Tomahawk."

"Well, he is an Indian, and it is his nature to war against the whites, who have warred relentlessly against his people—who have robbed him of his lands, destroyed his villages, shot his braves, and driven the poor women and children before them. Now, you would add to your crimes that of a public and cold-blooded murder; but you shall not do it!" and she looked like a defiant queen.

The ringleader gazed at the brave girl who thus defied him, and then at his men, evidently not knowing what to do. To be deprived of their prey was not to be thought of for a minute, but how to proceed was the question.

Red Tomahawk was a chief who had well won his name, and was noted among the leaders of the Sioux.

Separated from his braves, he had been captured the night before, and by the border usage there was but one thing to expect—death.

The interference of the maiden surprised him, and won his admiration.

The crowd were also surprised, but were in no temper to be thwarted of their vengeance.

"Pard, don't let a gal, ef she be a beauty, bully yer, but string up ther red-skin!" fiercely called out one borderman.

"Yas, up with him!" yelled the crowd; but stern and firm came the reply from the beautiful woman:

"I say no!"

"And I says yes, so here goes; and, my

beauty, you jist stand one side, for wimmins has no right ter be at hangin'-matches," and the ringleader stepped toward the Indian once more.

"Stand back, I say! The chief shall not hang!" and the brave girl thrust her hand under her cloak as though for a concealed weapon.

"Come, my beauty, don't play no game o' draw and cover on me, fer I hain't one ter stand that even from a gal. Jist stand aside from thet red-skin, or I'll hev ter drag yer away."

"One moment, please, my man, while I offer a little advice, and I back it with my gun!" and the tall form of the male passenger, who had sprung from the coach, stepped forward and confronted the leader.

He was a man of striking appearance, in physique and face as well, and was dressed in what appeared to be the undress uniform of a cavalry officer.

Scarcely over twenty-seven, he yet had the look of one who had seen much of the world. His words were uttered with the utmost calmness, and his tone was gentle rather than stern; but, his very calmness indicated that he was a dangerous person to arouse.

"Waal, what has yer ter chip in fer?" growled the ringleader.

"Simply that you had better all go into the bar yonder and drink at my expense, and let the red-skin go."

This was received with delight by many, for that kind of a crowd always is thirsty, but their ringleader and several others did not propose to let the red-skin run, and so the former retorted:

"I drinks nothin' with yer, and ef yer chips in, in my game, yer gits bluffed."

The stranger smiled, for his quick glance informed him that the crowd believed him to be an army officer and did not wish to go against his will, while there were others who wished the plucky girl to win her point, although they cared nothing for the Indian one way or the other.

"Do you mean that as a challenge for war?"

The leader should have read the face of the man better before he answered and acted, for he thrust his hand upon his revolver and cried: "It does!"

A quick movement of the stranger, a sharp report, and before the revolver of the bully had left its holster, he was a dead man!

A cheer broke from the crowd, for the ringleader of that tough cohort was a dreaded border ruffian, and hated, too. That a stranger and a "tenderfoot" had gone him one better in the game of shoot was just cause for astonishment.

"Gentlemen, take my advice and drink with me rather than fight," urged the stranger smilingly and unconcernedly.

The cheer that followed caused him to say something in a low tone to his young and beautiful companion, and then he led the way to the bar of the Palace Hotel, while the Indian was quickly set free by the deft fingers of the maiden, and told to fly.

He gave her one look of mingled gratitude and admiration and then bounded away like a deer, and, half an hour after, when the stage rolled away from Valley City, the cheers of the admiring bordermen followed the two strangers until a bend in the trail hid them from view.

CHAPTER V.

FIGHTING FATE.

"PARD PILGRIM, ef we don't reach ther timber afore 'em, we is cold meat sart'in, and ef we does git thar, with all o' them red-skins ag'in' us, it hain't sart'in we doesn't furnish ther corpses fer ther funeral."

The speaker was a thorough type of plainsman, gray, grizzly, with a complexion of red-skin hue from sunburn, and a form wiry, supple, and clad in buckskin.

He was mounted upon a raw-boned roan that was running rapidly along over a Western prairie, and was armed with rifle, revolver and a huge bowie-knife.

There were two persons with him, and two led horses, the latter carrying large packs.

The two accompanying the old guide, for such he was, were a man and a woman—the same, in fact, who had taken the part of the Indian chief, Red Tomahawk, ten days before they are found upon the prairie, flying for their lives.

"The chances are in our favor, guide," said the man, turning and glancing behind him over the prairie, to where a large band of Indians were in full chase a mile away, and stretched out according to the speed of their ponies.

The man then turned his gaze with some anxiety upon a rise in the plains, where there was a heavy growth of timber.

The timber was three miles away, and the Indians were slowly gaining, for the pack-horses could not be forced to greater speed, incumbered as they were.

A few days before, the man and woman had arrived at the end of a branch of the Overland stage line, and there had purchased horses for themselves and baggage, and, securing a guide, had started for a distant mining-camp.

When within a day's ride of their destina-

tion, they were seen and pursued by a band of half a hundred red-skins.

Even did they reach the timber, as the old guide had said, were they sure of beating back their foes? Might the savages not encircle their position and starve them out, even if kept at bay for days by the rifles, for there was no help near?

It was a gloomy outlook, and the man's face wore a very anxious expression.

But the beautiful face of the woman was unmoved; she showed no sign of dread, whatever she might feel, and certainly she knew her peril.

"We'll git thar, pard, but then—" said the old guide.

"Yes, we'll reach the timber," was the calm reply.

"Thar is a pile o' rocks thar whar a spring bubbles up, and some thick bushes and trees that makes it a good leetle fort, while ther critters and ther leddy kin find a hidin'-place, too," the guide informed his employer.

"You may hide the horses, but I am to be one of the defenders of our little fort, guide," declared the brave girl, and she smiled as she spoke.

"Waal, you has grit more than most men kin boast of, and it ar' a delight ter me ter fight fer yer, miss, so ef I goes under I falls in a good fight," the old plainsman remarked, gallantly.

The timber now was just ahead, and a moment after they dashed into it and rode directly for the pile of rocks, which were some ten feet above the surrounding land.

There was a little chasm in them into which the horses were led and their heads fastened together; then their riders sprang to positions among the rocks, for the Indians were coming on with a rush, as though determined to carry the position in the first charge.

But the guide and those he served held their guns ready, the young girl being armed with a small repeating-rifle.

On came the red-skins at a rush, those in advance dropping back until others came up, when they dashed upon the rocks with wildest yells, and firing rifles and arrows as they advanced.

The rifles of the defenders rattled at the order of the guide, and with deadly effect, for several mustangs and riders went down.

The fire was hotter than the red-skins had anticipated—not expecting any shot from the girl, nor that the whites had repeating-rifles, then seldom seen upon the plains.

So they sought cover, while their fierce yells of rage and disappointment were enough to send terror to the bravest heart.

Soon the rocks were surrounded, the red-skins seeking the cover of trees and other obstructions as they crept forward.

But over the tops of the rocks rung out the rifles of the trio at bay, and once more the red-skins fell back out of range.

"My God! the guide is killed!"

The words broke from the lips of the woman, and were true, for, with a bullet in the center of his forehead, the old guide lay dead.

"We are doomed, for they are coming again! I shall keep two shots, one for your heart, the other for my own," and the man sprang to the side of the maiden, who stood, rifle in hand, at her post.

CHAPTER VI.

GAMBLER GAUL.

GAMBLER GAUL was a perfect Adonis in face and form, and dressed as elegantly in the mining-camps as though he were a Broadway exquisite.

His form was athletic perfection, and his face was one to see and never forget, for there was that in it which fascinated the beholder, though it was not a fascination for its good import, but rather for its evil; it was the look of a Lucifer!

What other name Gambler Gaul was the possessor of, no one in the camps or outposts which he frequented seemed to know.

He had stepped out of the Overland stage one morning, looking trim and handsome, his boots polished, his hands gloved, and his graceful form clad in velvet jacket, black doeskin pants and a ruffled shirt-front with small diamonds in it.

He wore diamond sleeve-buttons too, and a ring of great value, while a massive gold chain about his neck had at the end of it a watch that was worth a small fortune.

A belt about his waist, under his coat, was fastened with a solid gold buckle, and the landlord, who escorted him to his room and saw him throw aside his coat, reported that his revolver and bowie were gold-mounted.

His broad sombrero was encircled, in lieu of a cord, by a chain both unique and suggestive, for it was of miniature cards, every card in a pack being represented, and fastened together by gold links!

He had brought a trunk with him, as though to stay, and had asked the landlord for the best room in his hotel—a cluster of log cabins of various sizes, the principal one of which was named the "Poker Hall and Spirit Palace."

"Gold Pocket" was the suggestive name of the camp, which boasted of several hundred

citizens, of the "Royal Roost," as the hotel was called, of several stores, and half a dozen saloons.

A laugh at the expense of the stranger had gone up, as he alighted from the coach, in response to which he had raised his dove-colored sombrero with the air of a courtier.

A number of very pertinent questions had been hurled after him by the amused miners, but he passed on to the "hotel," registered his name in a bold hand, and followed Landlord Lou Girard to his room.

And the name he had registered was:

"GAMBLER GAUL—The Earth."

This took the eye of the loafers, who crowded forward to see the inscription.

"Waal, he hev advertized his biz, and don't yer fergit it, pards," remarked one of the crowd.

"Yas, an' he hev writ down thet he hev got ther earth, so thar hain't nothin' we kin give him," another replied, while a third added:

"He ar' well named, fer he hez got *gaul*, and don't you fergit it!"

The conversation very naturally drifted into a dangerous channel, for Bully Bill, the worst man in Gold Pocket, decided to have some fun with the stranger when he came out.

He had not long to wait, for the stranger appeared, looking "his level best," as it was afterward said.

Bully Bill saw him saunter lazily into Poker Hall and make his way toward the bar—the cynosure of all eyes.

Bill hastily arose from the table, where he was preparing for a game of cards, and approaching the new-comer called out, rudely:

"Say, Tenderfoot, you has got *gaul* ter come ter Gold Pocket a-lookin' like a peacock with his Sunday feathers on."

"I am well supplied with *gaul*, as you will discover when you know me better," was the calm reply, and the words reached every ear in the room.

"Waal, I intends ter know yer better ef yer don't take my advice."

"And what is that?"

"Yer comes here a-writin' yerself down as Gambler Gaul, and thet yer has ther whole 'arth; but Gold Pocket don't belong to yer, and we doesn't want none o' yer kind here, fer yer is too fine fer us."

"Well, drive me out of Gold Pocket, my friend, and begin work whenever you think you have the sand to do so."

These words were uttered calmly, and a sardonic smile was on the face of the stranger.

He did not appear to be a "tenderfoot," after all, for his words certainly were a challenge to the bully.

He had his velvet coat buttoned, his elbows rested upon the bar, against which he leaned, and a cigar was between his lips.

Bill was quick to draw and shoot, all knew, and, if he had feared the stranger, he could, he knew, kill him before he could unbutton his coat and get a revolver leveled.

The words of the stranger angered him, and so he at once said savagely:

"I've got ther grit, and I says git, and git lively, and right suddint!"

He had suddenly drawn a revolver, and had it leveled at the stranger as he spoke, but the latter did not move. He still rested his back against the bar, his elbows upon it, and the smile did not leave his face, while he replied:

"Do you mean it, pard?"

"I does! *Git!*"

"You go first," and with the words came a puff of smoke, a ringing report and the desperado fell dead before he could pull a trigger.

The silence of death followed the shot, for all were dumb with amazement; but then came the words:

"Gentlemen, my name is Gambler Gaul. Let us get better acquainted, for I have come to stay. What will you drink?"

They arose to a man, like a congregation after the last amen, and moved toward the bar, and it did not take Gambler Gaul long to get better acquainted with the citizens of Gold Pocket.

And they knew him better as the days went by, for, though knowing nothing about him, they discovered that he was a phenomenal card-player and won their money as steadily almost as they dug it from the earth.

Not only was Gold Pocket the scene of Gambler Gaul's games, but all the mining-camps around soon learned to know him, while he visited the settlements, outposts and forts as well. Courteous in manner, generous toward all in distress, a deadly foe and fast friend, he was received everywhere as a "gentleman gambler," and was on social terms with many of the army officers and mine-owners.

CHAPTER VII.

HE MET HIS MATCH.

SOME six months after the arrival of Gambler Gaul in Gold Pocket his fame had spread along the frontier, for he had been engaged in a number of "affairs," which had been, in each case, forced upon him.

He had shown nerves like steel, a hand as steady as a rock, an eye quick as the lightning's

flash, and as deadly when it ran along a revolver-barrel.

He had been the "gentleman" in all his duels, and was spoken of by the miners as "ther squarest gent as ever kilt a man or cut a keerd."

One night Gaul, in Poker Hall, had been playing with phenomenal luck and the stakes were large, when, suddenly, the street door swung open and two persons entered who at once riveted every eye except the gamblers at Gambler Gaul's table.

They had ridden up to the hotel a short while before with a dozen troopers, and, after supper, had lighted their cigars and strolled into Poker Hall to pass away the evening.

The whisper that ran around the gambling-saloon told who one of the two was, for from a score of lips came the name:

"Buffalo Bill!"

It was indeed the famous scout, handsome, erect, and with the free-and-easy air natural to him.

He was clad in buckskin leggings and hunting-shirt, cavalry-boots, and a sombrero covered his head, while his long hair fell far below his shoulders. A belt around his waist held a pair of revolvers and knife.

His companion was a young man who rivaled him in splendid physique, and had a face to win admiration and command respect.

It was the face and form of a beau ideal soldier, such as he was, and he was in uniform, sword and all, and wore the rank of a senior lieutenant upon his shoulder-straps.

Two finer-looking men, with handsomer faces and more elegant physiques were never seen together in Gold Pocket, so it was no wonder that a hum of admiration went around the room.

Approaching the table, which was then the center of interest in Poker Hall, they took their stand where they could observe the game which was going all Gambler Gaul's own way.

The latter glanced up, and seeming to recognize the scout said, pleasantly:

"Ah, Cody, glad to see you! I'll have a chat with you after our game ends."

The officer the gambler did not observe, as he stood more upon his side, and Buffalo Bill returned:

"All right, Gaul, for we stop here to-night on our way back to the fort from a little scouting trip."

Then Cody turned to the officer and whispered:

"That is Gambler Gaul, Lieutenant Forrester, whom you have heard so much about since you came to the fort."

But the scout paused, for he saw that the face of Lieutenant Fred Forrester had become pale and stern.

His dark eyes were riveted upon the face of the gambler as though to read his soul.

Buffalo Bill watched him in surprise, for certainly the presence of the gambler had moved the lieutenant greatly.

At last the officer turned to the scout and asked, and his voice had lost its rich tone and become hoarse and angry:

"Who did you say that man was, Cody?"

"Gambler Gaul."

"His other name?" sharply and impatiently demanded Forrester.

"He is known by no other, sir."

The officer said no more, but watched the play with the same riveted look until the miner, who had been the last one to draw out of the game, said:

"I throws up my hands, pard, for you has won my last ounce o' dust."

He rose as he spoke, and quick as a flash, Fred Forrester slipped into his seat.

He was perfectly calm now, and his words were serenely uttered:

"Will you play with me, Gambler Gaul?"

Buffalo Bill was surprised at the sudden act of the lieutenant, but saw Gambler Gaul's face grow white as he met the eyes of the officer.

"Those two men have met before," muttered Cody, and he stepped nearer to await developments, for he seemed to feel that something would happen out of the usual run.

The start of the gambler and his turning pale was but momentary, for, in an instant, he was himself, and so quickly had he gained control over his nerves that not one had noticed his emotion save Buffalo Bill and, perhaps, the officer who had been the cause of it.

"I have not the honor of your acquaintance, sir, but it will give me pleasure to accommodate you with a game, though I warn you I play to win. My name is Gambler Gaul, sir, and yours is—"

"Fred Forrester, first lieutenant—th Cavalry. Name your stake, sir, and let me say, Mr. Gambler Gaul, that I too play to win."

Gaul simply bowed and placed the cards upon the table.

The officer at once called the bartender.

"A fresh pack of cards, please."

"You seem to doubt mine, sir?"

"Take my wishing a fresh pack of cards just as you please, Gambler Gaul," was the cool response.

The citizens of Gold Pocket were surprised, when Gambler Gaul said nothing, but took the

fresh pack of cards and placed them before the officer.

"Uncle Sam are going to lose one o' his pretty officers," muttered a miner. He seemed to voice the opinion of all, and the interest in the game became intense.

"Name your stake, sir," the gambler demanded.

"Best two in three games, and for one thousand dollars," was the cool reply.

Gaul bowed, and the game was begun, and ended. Fred Forrester was the winner.

A second game was played with like result; a thousand dollars was staked and won by the officer.

A third time the result was the same!

Surely the expert sharp's luck had deserted him.

And so it went on until five thousand dollars had been won by the lieutenant. Then Gambler Gaul said:

"I do not care to play any more, sir, and if you will come to my room with me, I will pay you the money in bills, for this gold you will find hard to carry."

"Thank you, I will go with you. Cody, I will join you presently," and Forrester and the gambler left the room together. A momentary silence followed their departure, broken at last by the words of a miner:

"Gambler Gaul hev met his match, or lost his grip on fortin', that ar' sart'in."

CHAPTER VIII.

NOT A MINUTE TOO SOON.

THE man and woman who stood at bay, there among the rocks in the timber, with a number of Indians rushing upon them, were strangely calm.

Their faces were pale, but upon each rested an expression of stern resolve.

What could they do to defend themselves further?

Nothing, they well knew, and so it was the man had said he would keep two shots for the last moment.

When that last moment came, and hope was gone, then the muzzle of the revolver would be placed against the heart of the beautiful girl and her end would be quick and painless.

And the same weapon would then be turned upon his own heart and by his own hand, the hand that had just taken the life of the being dearest of all to him in the world.

"I am ready," she said, with a voice in which there was a quiver, but no fear.

"It seems awful to die thus, to end our lives here on the plains, after all that—"

"You have no time," and the woman, breaking in upon his words, stepped to his side and pointed at the coming red-skins, now almost up to the rocks.

"True; the end is at hand!" and he raised his revolver and took aim at the nearest red-skin.

Down the Sioux fell from the pony he bestrode, and once more the weapon cracked, and this time a savage gave a yell of pain, for he had been wounded.

"Two more!"

The words were uttered grimly there in the face of death, and a third time the weapon flashed.

A third Indian fell from his pony in the agonies of a death-wound.

A fourth shot was about to follow when the young woman cried:

"Keep it! for one may miss fire!"

He lowered the weapon; then pressed the muzzle against her heart just as the red-skins reached the base of the rock pile.

But, just then, a wild, ringing war-cry echoed through the timber; all the Indians wheeled their horses suddenly and dashed back into cover.

Another instant and the woman would have died at the hand of one she loved.

Then again came that wild cry, piercing, ringing, fearful. The two on the rocks stood and gazed at each other in wonder, surprise and suspense.

What could it mean? Could it be that rescue had come to them at the last minute?

But, who could their rescuers be, if such they were, for no one knew of their danger, surely?

Yet the red-skins had certainly retreated, and in wondrous haste, and there was now not one in sight with hostile intent, though several dead and dying and a few ponies were lying here and there.

The yells of the Indians had ceased, and not a sound was heard in the timber, through which floated the smoke of the fire-arms forming into a cloud.

"What does it mean?" and the woman seemed to be growing nervous now as she asked the question.

The silence continued and the suspense grew more intense.

Then a form appeared, almost like an apparition, from the timber and advanced toward the pile of rocks. It was an Indian, but on foot, and his hands were raised above his head, the palms turned toward the two on the rocks.

"It is the chief!"

The woman's quick eyes had recognized the

Indian first, and she almost shrieked the words.

"Yes; your act that day at the stage station has saved us."

And the man sprang down the rocks and walked toward Red Tomahawk followed by the woman.

The chief looked haggard and wearied, and his feathers were limp, his buckskin soiled and ragged; but his eyes gleamed brightly as he held forth his hand and said:

"The Red Tomahawk come right time, and is glad. My braves did not know pale-face chief and squaw were friends of Red Tomahawk."

Both greeted him warmly, and then they learned that he had been making his way back to his people on foot, when, while hiding in a thicket, he had seen them ride by with their guide.

The latter was his foe, so the chief did not make his presence known, though he was sick, hungry and nearly exhausted.

His trail led along the way they had gone for awhile, and as he was about to turn off toward his village he saw where a number of hoof-strokes had followed on after his white friends.

He knew that they were his warriors, and so hurried on after them.

Wretched as he was, he held on his way, and hearing the firing ran with all his speed until he got near enough to make his well-known, thrilling war-cry heard.

His braves knew it but too well. It told them that their great chief was not dead, as they believed.

It recalled them from the charge, though on the very verge of success.

Now he would call his red warriors and let them know that the pale-face chief and the beautiful white squaw were his friends.

Such was the story of Red Tomahawk.

He called his warriors about him, told them what the two pale-faces had done for him, and pointed to their own dead and wounded as a proof that the two were brave foes.

Just then, a scout came up with the report that a party of cavalry were coming, and that, far in advance, following the Sioux trail, rode the great scout, Buffalo Bill.

"The Red Tomahawk and his braves will go, with their dead and wounded, and my pale-face friends will wait here for their people," announced the chief.

A few hurried words passed between the man and the woman, and then the former said quickly:

"No; we will not go with our people, but with the Red Tomahawk, and live among his people. Will he let us go with him and be as his children?"

That Red Tomahawk was pleased he did not conceal. He hastily said a few words to his braves in their own tongue, and they, too, seemed glad to have the whites accompany them.

"The chief has spoken well, and my people shall be his people, and the people of the beautiful pale-face squaw."

"Come, for the great scout, Buffalo Bill, is a dangerous foe, and he is not far away."

The horses and pack-animals were led out, Red Tomahawk mounted the horse of the dead guide, and the two mysterious whites fled from their own people, to seek a home among the red-skins.

Why?

Let my story reveal the mystery.

CHAPTER IX.

A BOND BETWEEN THEM.

LANDLORD GIRARD, of the Royal Roost, had given Gambler Gaul the best room in his cabin hotel.

It was apart from the rest of the cabins, just over a rear wing upon a rock that rose some thirty feet above the surrounding roofs, so that from the shed piazza in front a fine view was obtained of Gold Pocket and its surroundings.

Rude steps cut in the rock, or made with logs, led up to the gambler's quarters, and once there he was certainly very comfortable, strangely so for that wild land.

He was also safe in his retreat, as he could defend it from a dozen or more men, and, if necessary, could retreat over the ridge into heavy timber.

It was moonlight, and the walk was plainly visible, as Gambler Gaul led his companion to his quarters.

The officer followed in silence, and turned as he reached the platform in front of the door and gazed over the moonlit scene, while Gaul entered and lighted a lamp.

"Come in!" he said simply, and the officer obeyed, while the gambler motioned him to a seat.

With some interest he gazed around the cabin at the evidence of comfort, and remarked:

"You have pleasant quarters here?"

"Yes, and there is no danger of eavesdroppers."

"Perhaps a wise forethought where you live," and the lieutenant sneered, but the gambler replied quietly:

"Yes, I have found it to my advantage to have it so."

"Doubtless."

Again there was scorn on the face and in the tone; but calmly the man of cards smiled and replied:

"Let me congratulate you upon your skill as a card-player, while your nerve is wonderful."

"Thank you, and you will regard my nerve more highly when I tell you that I did not have a hundred dollars of my own money to-night to play with, but staked that belonging to others."

"Ah! you dared do this?"

"Yes."

"Loss would have ruined you?"

"True, and therein I showed my nerve; but, then, I was sure of winning."

"And why sure?"

"Oh, I have unbounded confidence in my luck, and *evenly* staked against *you*, I knew I should win."

There was an emphasis upon the words *evenly* and *you* which caused Gaul to ask quickly:

"Why say *evenly*?"

"Because had I played with your *marked* pack of cards I would have lost."

"You mean to say that I play with marked cards?"

"Yes, and why deny it?"

"Why do you think so?"

"Bah! don't ask me puzzling questions, but recall, if you can, when you were *ever* guilty of an honorable act?"

The face of Gambler Gaul flushed crimson, and he half-rose from his chair, while the lieutenant sat with an air of utter indifference to danger, and an expression of contempt upon his handsome face.

But the blood rushed back from the gambler's face, and he sunk into his chair, now pale but stern-looking.

As though checking any anger, and impulse to resent the officer's insulting words, he said:

"You did not tell me where you had learned to play cards so well?"

"Oh! in camp, and I am quite an adept now in handling the pasteboards."

"In fact, gambling is my besetting sin and leads me into many a scrape and extravagance, for, rich to-day, I indulge myself with luxuries, which, poor to-morrow, I cannot pay for, as I have lost often a small fortune in a night."

"I inherited my taste for gambling, don't you think?"

"Yes; but you will have a snug sum from your winnings to-night, to pay off your debts, so had best give up gambling after this."

"Satan rebuking sin. Ha! ha! ha! you are a clever scamp, indeed! But I shall not take my winnings to-night."

"Shall not take the five thousand you won?" asked Gaul, in astonishment, unheeding the insulting words cast upon him.

"I shall not."

"Why?"

"I shall not touch one dollar of your money, Gambler Gaul."

"Then why did you play?"

"To humiliate you, as I was sure that I could do so."

"And you did, for it is a bad thing for a man to lose prestige here. I shall have to kill two or three to regain mine."

"You will no mind that, for, from all I have heard, killing is your trade."

"See here! Do you not think it best to be more choice in your words to me?"

"Why should I be, for are you not now a fugitive from the hangman?"

"I certainly read an account of where you had taken a life and been forced to flee, but I had no thought of crossing your path out here, though I know that the wild West has long been an asylum for all manner of cut-throats and scapegraces."

"I recognized you the moment I saw you, and was glad to see that you had not forgotten me, though I could not really see how a man of even your elastic conscience could do so. Now tell me your plans?"

"To make gold."

"As a card-sharp?"

"Call me so if you will."

"Well, I have heard of Gambler Gaul, and how fine a gentleman he was, even recognized by the officers and their families, at the forts, where he plied his vocation."

"I have lately been ordered to Fort Fairview, but had not a thought of finding *you* in Gambler Gaul."

"You had your revenge in winning from me to-night, and I suppose will now wish to betray me?"

"Not if you steer clear of me. Go your way, and I will go mine, but do not seek to cross my path, and I will keep, for my own honor's sake, the secret that I have known Gambler Gaul in the past. Keep your money, for I do not wish it, though I need it, I admit. So, good-night, Gambler Gaul," and the lieutenant arose and left the cabin, while the gambler uttered not a word.

The officer joined Buffalo Bill in the Poker Hall, and his entrance was greeted with a cheer, for already was the idol dethroned by the flickle miners, and another set up—Gambler Gaul had

met his match, and many were willing to give him a kick who had before been his sycophantic admirers.

The next morning early Buffalo Bill and the lieutenant rode away from the Royal Roost followed by the squad of troopers; but the lieutenant uttered no word to the scout about the gambler, although Cody tried hard to draw him out upon the subject.

"They have met before, and there is some mystery in it all. The lieutenant downed the sport, that is certain; but, is Gambler Gaul a man to play quits so early in the game? We shall see!"

So mused Buffalo Bill as he followed the trail back to Fort Fairview with Fred Forrester, silent and thoughtful, some distance in the rear.

CHAPTER X. ON TRIAL.

A GLOOM rested upon Fort Fairview, and one that was felt from the commanding officer to the humblest man at the post.

Fort Fairview was the most popular post on the border, and young officers, and officers with families, were glad to be ordered there for duty.

It was in a country where there was constant peril, and red-skins were constantly on the war-path about it; but, for all that, it was an attractive place to sojourn, being beautifully located upon a cliff overhanging a winding stream, with views of the rolling prairie in one direction and the mountains stretching away in another.

The quarters were large and comfortable, and there was force enough there to render a surprise and attack from red-skins of no avail.

Of late a young officer had arrived at the fort who had, almost at once, won popular favor.

He was a man to win the admiration of both men and women, and, though young in frontier service, he had already been promoted to the first lieutenantancy of his company for distinguished services upon the field.

No better soldier was in the army, no better officer could be found, and he had won popularity with his men, the friendship of his brother officers and the kind regard of the ladies.

But he was a young man who lived a fast life and gambled recklessly, winning enough to live in luxury. And he enjoyed his ease, yet there was no harder worker on duty, no harder rider and fighter upon the trail.

Upon this favorite a cloud had fallen, and a court-martial had assembled to try him upon charges most serious.

As soon as he was able to appear, for he had been badly wounded, he faced the charge against him and told his own story.

He had been called from a game of cards, when he was losing heavily, to go with his company to the rescue of a fort officer, returning with a small train from the East, and who had been corraled by red-skins.

He had rescued the train, arriving just in time under the guidance of Buffalo Bill, and had found the officer referred to, Captain Lucius Kennerley, dying from a wound.

The captain had seemed, for some reason, to doubt him, but had intrusted to his keeping some valuable papers, personal effects and two packages of money, one to be given to the paymaster at the fort, the other to be placed in the hands of the captain's niece and ward, who was also to receive a package of papers.

He had accepted the trust, the money amounting to twenty-five thousand dollars, when the captain had breathed his last, had taken the valuable saddle-bags with the treasure, and gone on in pursuit of the flying red-skins.

He had gotten separated from his command, was pursued by Indians, and had hidden the saddle-bags.

On his way to the fort he had met Gambler Gaul, who had paid to him five thousand dollars which he had won from the gambler on a former occasion, and with this he had paid his debts to his brother officers.

Then he had returned for the hidden saddle-bags, had gone alone because he wished to do so, and after recovering them had ridden upon an ambush of outlaws, been wounded and forced to give up his treasure.

He had reached the fort suffering from his wound, and, telling his story, it had been disbelieved, in the face of his having paid all his debts when he came back from his rescue of the train.

Such was the story of Fred Forrester, and he told it in a frank manner that some believed to be innocence.

Others, however, believed him guilty, and when the court-martial returned a verdict of "Not guilty," the cloud fell darkly upon him in spite of this vindication of his honor by a military tribunal.

That night he went to his quarters a changed man.

He could count his friends in the fort upon the fingers of one hand, and all the rest prepared to cut him direct, when, to their chagrin, he cut them.

To his superiors he was particularly punctilious in his conduct and politeness, but there it ended, and the Outcast Officer, as he came to be

called, became a man to dread, when his enemies gazed into his stern-set face.

By a strange circumstance Gambler Gaul, who had often been at the fort, had disappeared even from his mining haunts, and so could not appear to prove the truth of Fred Forrester's assertion that he had paid him the five thousand dollars.

And by an also remarkable coincidence, Kate Kennerley, the beauty and heiress, the belle of the fort, who had lost her money through the young officer, boldly asserted his innocence, and publicly took pains to speak to him on parade, as did several others, but they were all with two exceptions among the officers, though the soldiers to a man asserted his innocence.

One of these two exceptions was Frank Powell, the surgeon of the fort, and whose career as a plainsman had won him fame and the name of the Surgeon Scout.

The other was Buffalo Bill.

The scout, it will be remembered, had seen the young officer win five thousand dollars from Gambler Gaul that night in Poker Hall.

Whether the winner took the money or not he did not know, for Fred Forrester had not spoken of the affair again.

The scout had seen the gambler afterward, at the fort, and yet he had never noticed Fred Forrester either play with him again, or speak to him.

When Gaul disappeared, an ugly rumor went about that he had been waylaid by Forrester, shot and robbed.

That there was something between the two men Buffalo Bill knew; so, going to Powell's quarters one night, he said:

"Powell, there is a deep mystery to solve here, and I start on the trail to-night to fathom it. Fred Forrester is either a villain, or a man cruelly maligned—which, I shall know."

CHAPTER XI.

GAMBLER GAUL PLAYS ANOTHER GAME.

GAMBLER GAUL did not return to Poker Hall the night he had met his match in Lieutenant Fred Forrester as a card-player.

When the officer returned and rejoined Buffalo Bill, the miners wondered where the gambler was, and, as the night passed on and he came not, the boldest of those present began to joke at his expense.

The one who set the example was a man who had been the sport of the camps until the coming of Gambler Gaul.

He was suspected of being a cheat, but was too shrewd to be caught, if guilty, but he had never played a game with Gaul, seeming to purposely avoid doing so.

He went by the name of Hercules the Sport, and his size and strength were such that few men would care to get into his grip.

He dressed in velvet, and after the coming of Gambler Gaul spruced up in his attire, put on a white shirt, and displayed considerable cheap jewelry, which, though it might pass for "good goods" among the miners, his rival knew to be only the cheapest kind of "pinchbeck."

The next morning Gaul was not to be found in the camps, and it was whispered about that he was ashamed, or afraid to show himself in his accustomed haunts.

Landlord Lou Girard reported that the officer, Buffalo Bill and the soldiers had departed before dawn, and that Gambler Gaul's cabin was locked and his best horse gone, showing that he too had gone away on horseback.

As night came on, the miners began to assemble in the saloons and Poker Hall, and more were gathered than usual, to talk over the affairs.

Hercules set the key-note by saying:

"Pards, I have allus thinked that man war a fraud, 'cause he never dared play me, yer noticed. Now he are han'som', I admits, and a sharp one with ther keerds, and he hev a bluffin' way about him as skeers folks; but he just wilted afore thet young soldier and lost his grip on his leetle winning game, yer see, and so got raked in fer a big pile. Thet soldier hev a awful nerve, and he would make a mighty dangerous enemy or card-sharp, for he's got ther grit ter back up his ideas every time."

"What is yer going ter do about it, Sport?" asked one of his pards, as the man paused and looked around for admiration, for he was painfully concealed.

"I are going ter ask him ter play me, and ef he refuses, then I will pernounce him a sweet singin' liar ef he calls hisself ther sport o' ther camps."

With this expressed purpose, all expected fun of a rich kind, according to the mining-camp ideas of fun, and longed for the return of Gambler Gaul that their anticipated hopes might be realized.

But the night passed and Gaul failed to put in an appearance, which served, of course, to encourage the belief that he was afraid to show himself.

The next day Hercules, the Sport, was in his glory, and began to feel as he had before the coming of his rival—that is, that he was the sport of the camps.

The evening following Poker Hall was crowded. Hercules had drifted suddenly back into

popularity, and the odds were offered upon him, should his rival return, that he would drive Gambler Gaul out of the mining country.

"I'll do it, pards, I'll do it as sart'in as my name are Hercules. I allus bets ter win, and I says a hundred on it that I does win."

"I'll take the bet, though I do not know what you are betting on."

All were startled as the deep, musical and well-known tones fell upon their ears.

A silence like unto a death-chamber rested upon Poker Hall, for, following the words, Gambler Gaul stepped into the room.

His eyes were upon Hercules, yet it seemed that every man in the room caught his glance.

The Sport was fairly startled; but he had gone too far to back down. Besides, he believed that he had to do with an uncrowned king, who was playing a game of bluff to try and regain his lost prestige.

But before he could reply, though Gaul had given him ample time, the latter continued:

"Yes, I will take the bet, whatever it may be, and for any sum from one hundred to ten thousand."

"I lost a cool five thousand with that handsome and lucky soldier, the other night, and I wish to see if I can regain my luck."

"You, Hercules, have never had the pluck to play me, so do so now if you have the money and can screw up your nerve, which I doubt."

This was carrying the war into the enemy's country with a vengeance, and the challenge made Hercules wince.

As for the others, it delighted them.

Gaul was back again, and he evidently meant to step into his old place. He was calm as a May morn, but, as all saw, meant business.

Seeing that he must speak, Hercules decided to come right out. He had been cornered by his own imprudent talk; the eyes of all were upon him; he must back Gambler Gaul down or lose caste at once.

"I were sayin' as how yer never hed played me, Pard Gaul, and thet yer was afeerd ter, and, bein' as yer lost yer grip with ther officer gent t'other evenin', why, I meant ter hold ther fort and make yer back down."

"That was your bet, then?"

"Waal, yas."

"I took it for a hundred just now?"

"Yas."

"Waal, put up your hundred, and I'll put up ten thousand against it that I prove you a liar—Hold! I've got you covered, so play the game, ten thousand to one hundred, and then try your shooting act."

"Money talks!" yelled a miner, with delight, at the words.

"Yas, put up or shet up, Sport?" cried another.

"Put up or get out," calmly added Gaul.

"I'll put up, and thar it are," and Hercules threw the money upon the table.

Taking a pencil from his pocket, Gambler Gaul wrote a few lines on a slip of paper, and said:

"There is an order on Landlord Girard for the money, if I lose—is it good, Lou?"

"It is, and for more," was the reply.

"Now, gentlemen, I will walk to yonder end of the room, and Sport Hercules can remain here, while you, Girard, give the order to advance, counting one, two, three, fire."

"The man who shoots before the word fire, you must kill in his tracks. When we begin to fire, we are to keep it up until one of us runs or dies, and, as I never run and this is not my day for dying, you had better prepare yourself for a foot-race or a funeral, Sport Hercules."

There was nothing for Hercules to do except to fight or fly. The chances might be for him to kill his foe and win ten thousand dollars, and then he would indeed be the hero of the camp!

So he stepped to the end of the hall where he was to stand, while the crowd ranged themselves in rows upon either side, with Lou Girard in the center.

Gambler Gaul walked to his post with an air of utter unconcern, and said pleasantly:

"I am ready for the game, Lou."

"Me, too," growled Hercules, and the landlord at once sung out:

"Ready! one! two! three! fire!"

With the command the two men stepped forward, and when the word fire was upon the landlord's lips the two revolvers flashed—one an instant of time before the other.

That instant did the work, for the bullet of Gaul entered the forehead of Hercules directly between the eyes!

Hercules had lost the game of life and death, and Gaul was once more king of gamblers.

CHAPTER XII.

HAPPENINGS AT FORT FAIRVIEW.

ANDEDATING the events just chronicled we may now explain the situation at Fort Fairview.

In the first place the coming of Kate Kennerley to the fort had hurt other fair maidens who had ruled supreme until she arrived.

Kate Kennerley was the daughter of an army officer who had married a Mexican lady, and had, at the death of her father, been left to the

guardianship of her uncle, also of the army, and stationed at Fort Fairview.

Kate had hardly known her uncle before he died, for she had been left at another post, while he had gone East on business, so that her affection for him had not had time to take deep root, and she regarded him, therefore, only as a kinsman.

When she went to Fort Fairview she had been placed under the care of Mrs. Denton, whose husband was a major at the fort.

Mrs. Denton, when she was Mabel Moore had won the love of Lucius Kennerley, then a cadet, but she had married Major Denton to save her father from financial ruin, although the young soldier had her heart.

The major was over a score of years her senior; they had no children, and so were really very glad to welcome Kate Kennerley into their home, for Mrs. Denton had never forgotten her first love, though making a true and loving wife.

She well knew that her boy lover had remained a bachelor because he had still her image in his heart.

Then, too, Kate was an heiress, and very beautiful, with a nature that won all hearts, though at times she would cause her admirers to dread her sarcastic wit.

When the shadow fell upon Fred Forrester, Kate Kennerley, though the loser of five thousand dollars, still believed him innocent, as did also Major Denton and his beautiful wife.

Then, too, soon after the court-martial had declared him not guilty, he had saved Kate, who had hidden out alone upon the prairie to sketch, from being kidnapped by two of an outlaw band known as the Brimstone Brotherhood.

But even for this gallant act Lieutenant Forrester was not praised, and it but made the admirers of Kate Kennerley more bitter toward him.

General Carr was also the friend of the out-cast officer, and so also were Surgeon Frank Powell and Buffalo Bill, while the soldiers to a man believed in him; but there was an immense pressure against him among all others.

Forrester was as proud as Lucifer, and had cut where he had been intended to be cut by others, while he had sold out his handsome furniture, paintings and *bric-a-brac*, extra horses and all that had made his life luxurious, dismissing his extra servants and living as plainly as a common soldier.

He had also drawn from the paymaster only living expenses, had left the balance to his credit, intending with the amount of his sales to pay Miss Kennerley her five thousand, and devote all else, with his pay, to liquidating the twenty thousand he had lost which had belonged to the Government.

He had stopped gambling, and visited no one, keeping severely to himself, while he was wont to take long rides upon the prairie alone.

It was really believed by many, as Gambler Gaul could not be found, that Fred Forrester had killed and robbed him, but reported that he had met him and paid him a gambling debt.

Others believed that the young officer paid his debts at the fort with Kate Kennerley's five thousand dollars, and that he had the twenty thousand belonging to the Government hidden away somewhere.

So matters stood at the fort when Buffalo Bill came in and secretly reported to General Carr that he had seen Captain Fred Forrester, who was away on a special leave of a few days, visit Captain Brimstone in his camp of outlaws.

This report even staggered the trust of General Carr, for he felt that the famous scout was Forrester's friend and could not be mistaken.

Then, too, Buffalo Bill had a chance to observe that which a happy circumstance for him had rendered possible.

There had been a sergeant in the army known as Brick Benson, who had killed a fellow-soldier over a game of cards and fled. He had turned outlaw, and a reward was offered for his head as deserter and outlaw.

This man so closely resembled Buffalo Bill as to be often mistaken for him, and though on a former occasion he owed to the scout his life, he had in the end fallen by his hand, and while dying had admitted to his slayer that he was one of the band of Brimstones, as the outlaws were called.

Cody gave the Deserter Sergeant decent burial, and at once formed the bold plan of impersonating him among the outlaws, which he could the more readily do as they were always masked, and so were unknown to each other.

Buffalo Bill also had a stronger motive in this than the running down of the outlaws, for the dying sergeant had been on his way to form an alliance between them and Snow Face, the cruel white renegade chief of the Sioux, and he hoped to find out the haunts of the red-skins and their strength, so as to lead an attacking force against them.

By seeking the outlaws, he could also discover if they had really robbed Lieutenant Forrester, as he had said they had, and thus cast the lie into the teeth of his foes who refused to believe him other than guilty.

So Cody had left the fort, impersonating the Deserter Sergeant, and while in the camp of the outlaws had actually seen Fred Forrester visit the chief, Captain Brimstone.

This certainly looked as though the officer was the ally of the outlaws, and the sight staggered the faith of the scout in him.

Bill had discovered that Captain Brimstone had three different squads working the Overland stage and gold trails, and with a common rendezvous or retreat, while in case of defeat and being hard pressed by the soldiers they could retreat into the Indian country and claim protection from Snow Face.

To the amazement of all at the fort, Captain Forrester, for he had been promoted to the command of his company, returned from his scout alone with the saddle-bags which he said he had been robbed of by outlaws.

He gave to the paymaster, with unbroken seal, the package of twenty thousand dollars Government money, and to Miss Kate Kennerley her five thousand dollars, the papers accompanying them, and the watch and other things which her uncle had on at the time of his death, and which he had intrusted to Forrester.

He offered no reason for his regaining the valuable saddle-bags, made a report secretly to General Carr, and said no more on the subject to exonerate himself; but, instead of its helping him in the minds of others, it did him the more harm, as it was at once asserted that he had had the treasure hidden away, until seeing that nine-tenths of his former friends had treated him as an outcast, he had decided to restore them.

About this time Buffalo Bill sent for a force from the fort to attack the Brimstones. This onslaught was successful, and yet the report of the affair said that it was through information furnished by Captain Fred Forrester, gleaned on his scout alone that it had proven so.

The Brimstone Brotherhood had been defeated, each party of them, but their chief, Captain Brimstone, had not been captured, and so the work had been but half-done.

So stood matters at the fort when orders came that sent General Carr to another and a larger command, to the regret of every one at Fort Fairview.

CHAPTER XIII.

BUFFALO BILL'S BOYS IN BLUE.

"GENERAL CARR, I have a favor to ask of you, sir."

The speaker was Buffalo Bill. He had just entered the pleasant quarters of General Carr, who commanded Fort Fairview and the country round about for many scores of miles.

"Name it, Cody, and I cannot refuse, after all you have done to serve me and the Government," and General Carr turned from his work at the desk, where he had been writing, and faced the scout, at the same time motioning to him to take a chair.

"You are to leave us, sir?"

"Yes, Bill, and I regret it, for I have many friends here; but then, I am given a larger command, you know."

"Yes, sir, and we will all regret to leave you; but it is before you give over the command to Colonel Cassidy that I wish you to do me a favor by issuing a special order in my behalf, though a secret one."

"Ah! some other plot you are going to work out, Cody?"

"Yes, sir, and I will explain it fully."

"By my impersonation of the Deserter Sergeant I was able to find out the stronghold of Snow Face, the renegade white chief of the Sioux, who were the allies of the Brimstone Brotherhood."

"Now, sir, we scattered the three bands of Brimstones, but the captain escaped, and some of his men with him, and, as he is not a man to remain idle, he will soon have another outlaw force on the trails."

"Your belief is that this Captain Brimstone is no other than Gambler Gaul, who has so mysteriously disappeared of late months?"

"Yes, sir, I do, and do not, believe it, both."

"You know I told you that the Deserter Sergeant confessed to me that Captain Brimstone was Gambler Gaul?"

"Yes."

"Well, sir, I saw him masked only, and so am unable to take oath as to who he is; but I half believe he is Gaul, and I intend to find out."

"Captain Forrester made some statements to me and to Surgeon Powell, which I am sworn to secrecy about; but the cloud upon him seems to have deepened, instead of passed away, by his returning the treasure he was robbed of."

"It certainly has, and I regret to see Lieutenant Burke Blackford still keeping up his charges against Forrester."

"Lieutenant Blackford, general, is in love with Miss Kennerley and regards Captain Forrester as a dangerous rival."

"True, and tries to blacken Forrester's name to win favor with Miss Kennerley himself, and it is shameful, to say the least of it, and I fear may lead to trouble."

"It may, sir; but I am anxious to accomplish three things, and so come to you for aid."

"All right, Cody; tell me what you want."

"Well, general, I am determined to prove

Captain Forrester either guilty or innocent, and so shall take the trail for this work."

"It is generous of you, Bill, and I wish you success, but you need expect no help from Forrester himself."

"I am aware of that, sir, for he is so imbibed that he will neither do nor say anything to clear himself, as he says the court-martial cleared him of the charges against him, and therefore is indifferent to the rest."

"Yes, and yet there is hardly an officer here who believes in the innocence of Forrester, I regret to say; but your second plot to carry out, Cody—what is that?"

"To capture Captain Brimstone, sir, and utterly wipe out his band."

"A good idea, indeed; but now for the third."

"To capture by strategy, if possible, Snow Face the Renegade, and then attack his stronghold, which we can carry readily when the Indians know that they have not the white chief to rely upon."

"I agree with you; but I suppose this will all come under the orders of my successor, Colonel Cassidy?"

"That is why I come to you now, general, for Colonel Cassidy does not understand the situation, and will be slow in allowing me to move in the matter, and much depends upon time."

"Also, Colonel Cassidy will wish explanations which I cannot, will not give until I have accomplished my purpose."

"Well, I will especially detail you for the work, and order you upon it, giving Colonel Cassidy to understand that you are on a secret trail which will be made known to him at some future time, and also giving you all the aid you may need."

"Thank you, general; but I am anxious to have a command of my own for my work, to go with me where I wish or will, without interference or explanation."

"Your scouts, you mean?"

"No, sir, for there are so few at the fort they cannot be spared just now; and besides, I have reason to suspect a couple of them and wish to keep my eye upon them closely."

"What men can you get, then, Cody?"

"Soldiers."

"Ah! and how many?"

"A sergeant, two corporals and twenty-four men. This will give me three detachments, if needed, each under a non-commissioned officer, and I would like to have the privilege of sending for Captain Forrester, Surgeon Powell and Texas Jack, if they are needed."

"Very well. I shall grant your request, Cody, for I feel that you have some bold plan in view to render service to the frontier posts."

"And may I pick my Boys in Blue, general?"

"You mean select your soldiers?"

"Yes, sir. I have watched the soldiers very closely, in camp and on the trail, and have chosen my men. Half of them are from Captain Forrester's own company."

"Very well, Cody; I will order the men detailed, if you will give me the list. Where will they report to you?"

"They must leave camp at night, sir, in twos and threes, and report to me at the Canyon Ford, the second night from this, sir, and go prepared for an indefinite stay, or rather for several weeks."

"All right; I will give the order."

"And if you would have them report to you, sir, each one of them, and tell them that they are to say nothing about leaving the fort, it would be better."

The general turned to his desk, made a few notes, and then received from Buffalo Bill the list of names, after which he said:

"Success to you, Bill, with your Boys in Blue!"

That night the scout left the fort. He led out after him several pack-horses heavily loaded, and, soon after, in twos and threes his Boys in Blue began to depart secretly for the Canyon Ford.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE OUTLAW IN BLACK.

A MAN sat in front of one of the stage stations of the Overland, smoking his pipe and watching the curling smoke in a lazy sort of way.

It was an out-of-the-way station, built on a mountain, and commanding an extensive view upon every side for miles.

There were good grazing lands near, and in the stockade corral were some thirty horses, for they had been driven up from pasture for the night.

The corral was just behind the cabin, and surrounded by a wall some ten feet in height, made of long posts planted close together.

The cabin was of heavy logs, with a door in front, two narrow apertures upon either side, and at the ends, running horizontally with the logs, and evidently intended for rifle use in defense, as much as for light and air.

From the rear of the corral, which was overhung by a high ridge, a narrow canyon ran back into the mountains, giving a means of es-

cape if an attack on the cabin should be successful.

A rude hammock, a bench and an easy rustic chair were in front of the cabin, under a shed shelter, and also shaded by several trees of heavy foliage. The view was a fine one, up and down the trail that led by the station, and along which the semi-weekly stage came and went.

The man enjoying his pipe was the station-agent, who dwelt there alone in charge of the horses of the company, and also of the Pony Express, which made it a halting-place twice a week.

This agent was an odd character, and his walk, which gave one the idea that he was lame, had gained for him the sobriquet of Tenderfoot Tom.

But he was not lame; on the contrary, he could run like a deer when there was need of it. He was, too, noted along the border as a horse-man, a dead shot, and an expert lasso-thrower.

Large, muscular and well-built, he dressed in buckskin, leggins stuck into top-boots, a blue woolen shirt and slouch hat.

He wore a belt of arms, and a rifle constantly swung at his back, as though he was ready for work at any moment.

Besides his two revolvers and bowie, his belt held ammunition for a day's fighting.

Tenderfoot Tom's face was a bold one, yet quite unreadable.

There were many who deemed him a rascal, but he had never been caught in any lawless acts; he had the confidence of his employers, while he was the only man whom the company had found willing to take the chances alone at that desolate station.

The sun was on the horizon, and he had just decided to cook his evening meal, when his keen eyes discovered a horseman approaching on the upland trail.

"Now, who are he?" he muttered, and took from a holster in his belt a small field-glass and turned it upon the stranger.

"Don't know him, but he do look uncommon like a tramp parson, and ef he be I must keep a eye on him, for he do meditate to camp heur to-night."

The object of his remarks soon after drew rein before the station.

He was mounted upon a jet-black, and what at first appeared to be a sorry-looking horse; but a second look showed that the animal had points not to be despised.

His saddle and bridle might pass muster for a mounted undertaker's outfit, for they were as somber as night, but in perfect keeping with the black horse and sable-hued clothes of the rider.

The latter's face was clean-shaven, the mouth drawn down in a melancholy expression that seemed chronic, and his flaxen hair hung in straight masses to his shoulders, a lock being trained to grow before his ears.

He wore gold spectacles, the glass being of a smoked-glass hue. Altogether he was the picture of an itinerant preacher of the most solemn order.

He was dressed in a seedy black suit, the coat buttoned up to his chin, and his pants were fastened under his boots with straps.

A white necktie gave him a further ministerial look, and this was added to by a white beaver, around which was a massive band of crape.

His hands were incased in black gloves, and altogether he was as dismal-looking a specimen of humanity as one would meet with in a year's travel. But, singularly enough, about his waist was a belt of arms, wholly out of keeping with his appearance.

"Waal, Parson Black, is yer on the war-trail arter sinners?" cried Tom, as the strange-looking individual rode up to the door.

"My friend, I am on the trail of the devil, that goeth about seeking to lead lambs from the fold, and this is my weapon to destroy him with," and the man spoke in a drawling, whining tone, while he drew from his saddle-bags a Bible, and held it toward Tom, who hastily cried:

"Hands up, pard, and don't p'int thet weepion at me, fer I hain't no target ter shoot prayer inter."

"It has terrors for all, my friend, and with it I have no fear even in these wilds to trust in Providence."

"But I sees yer backs up Providence with some right peert-lookin' shootin'-irons, and you is right, out in these parts. But who is yer, pard?"

"Have you never seen me afore?"

"No, for I hain't been ter preachin' since I were a Sunday-school kid."

"Look at me close."

"I hain't blind, and I sees yer."

"Who am I?"

"I sets yer down as a cross atween a sky pilot and a hearse-driver."

A laugh, clear and ringing, broke from the lips of the horseman in black, and in a different tone came the words:

"Well, Tenderfoot, if I can deceive you, I can any one."

"Howlin' coyotes! but you is Captain Brim-

stone in ther outfit o'a sky pilot!" cried the Overland station-master in amazement.

"Yes, I am the chief of the Brimstone Brotherhood, Tom, now in disguise as an Outlaw in Black. You like my disguise, eh?"

"Waal, I'd hev never know'd yer, and durned ef yer couldn't fool old Saint Peter at ther golden gates, slip in and git a front seat and a spare harp in the outfit."

"Why, yer looks sad enough ter be at yer own funeral and ter set a whole prayer meetin' ter weepin'."

"Cap'n, I is glad ter see yer, for I thought yer was dead," and Tenderfoot Tom held forth his hand, which the outlaw in black warmly grasped with the remark:

"No, I am not dead, as you see; but there was a traitor among the Brimstone Brotherhood, who betrayed us, one band after another, killed about half of us, and captured others who were quickly hanged."

"I escaped, though Buffalo Bill pressed me close, and going East got up this outfit and returned to open business again, and I need your aid."

"Better have stayed East, cap'n, away from ropes and trees."

"Maybe so; but I have my eyes on a certain sum of money I need, to enjoy life with, and I am going to get it, or—hang. Are you with me, Tom?"

"You bet I be, cap'n; but, what's the work?"

"To get gold is the main thing; but, first, I wish to find the Deserter Sergeant, whom I believe escaped, and the rest of my men who got away. Then I shall organize my band again and take the trails, and I have made a vow to hang Buffalo Bill some day," and the man spoke with savage earnestness.

"I'm with yer, Cap; but, dismount and we'll talk it over arter supper," and Tenderfoot Tom began to prepare the evening meal, while his guest unsaddled his horse and put him in the corral for the night.

After supper at a rustic table under the trees, the two men entered the cabin, while a huge dog, belonging to Tom, took up his place in front of the cabin door, a faithful guardian during the hours of darkness.

CHAPTER XV.

THE BOY BUGLER.

A TRAIN pulled out of Fort Fairview before dawn one morning, bound eastward.

In it were a number of "prairie schooners," as wagons were called, going to a depôt of supplies for stores and ammunition.

Then there were several ambulances with wounded officers, or men, going home on sick leave, and a detachment of cavalry as a guard, with several scouts, hunters and bangers on about all trains crossing the plains.

In all, there were some half a hundred men, and a score of vehicles. They were traveling light, and under orders to push ahead at a good gait, for the prairie schooners and ambulances were to return loaded, in a few weeks.

Among those in the train was a youth who could but attract attention in any assemblage.

He was of slender, graceful build, and his movements were quick and decided.

He was dressed in uniform, and wore the insignia of a regimental bugler, while he was splendidly mounted and equipped.

The face of the youth was a beautiful study, for it was fearless, daring and yet effeminate.

Then, too, every feature was cast in a perfect mold, the teeth were even and milk-white, and the eyes large, lustrous and full of expression.

He rode well, and with the air of one who was at home in the saddle.

Nothing seemed to be known of the boy, other than what it had pleased him to tell of himself. He had said that he was an orphan—that he had come West to enlist in the army as a bugler, and his splendid talent as a musician soon got him that position.

He had come West with Captain Kennerley's train, which had been corraled by Snow Face and his Sioux, and had been saved by the plucky Fred Forrester coming to the rescue.

When Captain Kennerley had entrusted his valuables, when dying, and the money for his niece, Kate Kennerley, along with the Government money, to Fred Forrester, the youth had stood near and heard and saw all, but was himself unnoticed by the young cavalry officer.

After reaching the fort, one day on parade, Fred Forrester had come face to face with Billie Blew, the Boy Bugler. It was said that the lieutenant then seemed deeply moved, and the impression soon prevailed that the two had met before, and under painful circumstances, too.

It was not long after that the train started eastward, and, to the surprise of all, Billie Blew went with it.

He gave no excuse, other than that he would give up being a soldier, and yet all felt that he had some motive for leaving a regiment so suddenly, where he had become a great favorite.

The train had camped its first night out, and the sun was just sinking below the horizon, when a scout reported a horseman on the trail they had come.

He came at a swinging lope, and, as he neared the camp, all saw that he was in uniform and an officer.

"It is Captain Forrester," announced a scout.

The lieutenant in charge of the train now recognized his brother officer, and his face flushed.

He was not on speaking terms with Captain Forrester, and felt that his position was an awkward one.

With others he believed Fred Forrester guilty of the charges which he had been court-martialed for; but his duty was beyond personal feelings, and so he arose to greet his superior and did so, politely at least.

His salute was returned in a way that showed it was only military etiquette that prompted it; then came the words:

"Lieutenant Castleman, you have with you the youth, Billie Blew, the Boy Bugler?"

"Yes, sir; but will you not dismount and share my camp?"

It was hard for Lieutenant Walter Castleman to be polite, but he could not well be otherwise to the officer who was his superior.

"Thank you, no! Send for Blew at once and say that I desire to see him."

Walter Castleman called to a soldier and sent him after the bugler, who was somewhere about the camp. An awkward silence followed, awkward at least to the lieutenant, who seemed to feel the presence of the captain keenly, one who was an outcast in the fort almost, and whose life was so deeply clouded.

As for Forrester, he coolly glanced over the camp, apparently enjoying the picturesque scene, with the camp-fires now blazing brightly and lighting up the gathering gloom.

"Captain Forrester here and has sent for me?" and the Boy Bugler paled as the soldier delivered his message.

"Yes, sir, he is at headquarters of the camp," was the reply.

The bugler stood a moment in silence, and then turned to the "A" tent which had just been pitched for him.

Entering it he was there but an instant, and then followed the soldier back to the quarters of Lieutenant Castleman at the other end of the camp.

As he neared the spot and his eyes fell upon the silent horseman he straightened up, stepped more briskly, and saluting the captain, said:

"You sent for me, Captain Forrester?"

"Yes, come with me," and dismounting, the officer led the way out of the camp, while all wondered at the strange occurrence, and Walter Castleman muttered:

"What does it mean?"

CHAPTER XVI.

TWO THREATS.

WHEN Captain Fred Forrester led the way out of the glare of the camp-fires of the train, it at first appeared to be very dark; but as the encampment was left behind, the light of the moon shone over the prairie and revealed the faces of the officer and Boy Bugler distinctly.

Until he had gone a long way out of hearing of those in the camp the officer led the way, and came to a halt just as the Boy Bugler asked, with some anxiety:

"Where are you taking me?"

"Do you fear to follow?"

"I have no fear of any man."

"Then why object to follow me where we cannot be overheard?"

"We will not be overheard here."

"Very well; this spot will do."

"Why did you come after me?"

"That you shall soon know."

"I shall call for help if you mean me harm."

"Bah! I knew you were a coward, in spite of your professed courage; but I mean you no harm."

"I am not so sure of that."

"You are a fool, for I would not have it on my conscience to harm you, and if I did so wish I could have laid in wait for the train and shot you—see, yonder sits Lieutenant Castleman, and how easily I could pick him off with my rifle, for you know I am a dead shot."

The bugler seemed assured at this and replied:

"Yes; did you kill me, it would be known, and then you would be in far worse trouble than you are now."

"I could not be, for I am under a cloud that blackens my whole life; yes, it makes me an outcast among my brother officers and exiles me to live to myself."

"Why did you take that girl's money and the Government funds entrusted to you by Captain Kennerley?"

The officer started and stepped nearer to the bugler, as though to strike him; but, instantly checking himself, he said, impatiently:

"Ruby, you are a fool, and your playing the part of a man almost caused me to forget that you are not one."

"Listen to me, for I came after you to say more than I did when you were at the fort."

"You saved me from death when I was a

cadet at West Point, by overhearing a plot of two men to kill and rob me on the steamer, and thus warning me.

"Beautiful in face and form, as innocent-looking as an angel from heaven, I believed you true and noble, and loved you—at least I *thought* I loved you."

"Yes, and now that you have met Kate Kennerley, whom you robbed of five thousand dollars, you have discovered that you never loved me."

"Don't be jealous, Ruby, for there is not an atom of love in your heart for me, and you know it."

"You love yourself and gold, and you played your cards to win me, for you learned that I was the heir of my old kinsman."

"You and your mother plotted well, and it seems you come of a wicked blood, for your brother, Robert Benson, left home and entered the army to become out here known as Brick Benson, a gambler, murderer, and at last as the Deserter Sergeant he became a hunted man."

"Do you know if my brother yet lives?"

"It has been said that he was dead, time and again; but you must hear me now, for I am here to show you that I am in deadly earnest."

"I never suspected you of being so evil, you and your mother, to plot the death of my kinsman, so that I, his heir, who had secretly married you, would get his money at once."

"Then my death would have quickly followed; but you did not know him, and when you told him that I had secretly married you he at once made another will, and so your poisoning him was of no avail."

"For God's sake cease your charges against me," cried the disguised woman.

"You at times appear to have a conscience, Ruby, and yet you came here to plot my ruin."

"I came for gold."

"Oh, yes, doubtless; but on the way you told Captain Kennerley things about me that caused him to doubt me, and had there been another officer present when he was dying that night on the prairie, he would never have intrusted to me the money he had in keeping."

"You went on to the fort, and it was hints that you threw out secretly that damned my character the more."

"I was tried and cleared by the court-martial, and yet nearly every one turned their backs upon me, or would have cut me dead had I not ignored first their very existence."

"And yet you returned the money which you said had been stolen from you, or rather that you had been robbed of by road-agents?"

"I did."

"This was proof that you had hidden the saddle-bags containing the treasure, and only to regain lost prestige, went and got them again."

"It may seem so to you; but I restored them, and how I regained them is no affair of yours or of others."

"I knew that you had come, after I recognized you that day in man's attire, to further ruin me at the fort, and so I drove you from there, under the threat that I would bring the charge against you of having murdered the man whose fortune I was to have inherited, had you not told him I had secretly made you my wife."

"You, knowing your guilt, were forced to leave."

"I would have gone had you given me the price I demanded."

"Yes, the money that those saddle-bags contained; but I could not pay the price, so drove you away; but I gave you the money received from the sale of my furniture, horses and souvenirs, and I feel that I did more than my duty in doing this."

"But I shall demand on your part instant action, and I came after you to convince you that you must do as I demand."

"You mean, apply for a divorce from you?"

"Yes, for I feared I had not made it plain enough at the fort, that you were to go to my lawyer in New York and have him arrange it upon any plea that you may deem best, for I will not appear to contest it, and then you and I will be free from each other."

"If I refuse?"

"Then, by Heaven, Ruby, I mean to charge you with murder and prove it."

"You know the alternative; you have over five thousand dollars that I have given you, so go now and obey me, or else you will regret it, and I am in deadly earnest."

"What do you say?"

"I will do it."

"You swear it again?"

"Yes."

"Enough; good-by, and if you have a spark of honor left, change your career and do not throw yourself away."

As he uttered the last words, Fred Forrester threw himself into his saddle and rode away, leaving the woman standing alone in the moonlight.

An instant she remained like a statue, and then shaking her clinched fist at the form of the departing officer, she hissed forth:

"No, no, Fred Forrester, my handsome, gallant husband, my revenge will be not to set you free—I have not done with you yet."

CHAPTER XVII.

A CRUEL FATE.

THE Eastward-bound train continued slowly on its way, slowly, though to the drivers of the teams it seemed that they were making good time, and the week after its departure ended with it not quite two hundred miles from Fort Fairview.

After the visit of Captain Forrester to the first night's encampment, the Boy Bugler returned to camp and had nothing to say as to why he had been followed by the officer.

That there was some mystery about it, all in the train felt certain, and Lieutenant Walter Castleman hinted to the bugler that he would be glad to know why the captain had come.

But Billie Blew had nothing to say, and this but added to the mystery.

It was known, or suspected, that the officer and the bugler had met before the latter's coming to the fort, and some had suspected that the sudden leaving of the youth might have been the work of Fred Forrester.

Now, the first night's camp on the trail, Fred Forrester had come on after the train, called the Boy Bugler out of earshot of all others, and the two had stood there for an hour engaged in conversation, when the captain had sprung into his saddle and dashed away.

It was very strange, to say the least of it.

When Billie Blew returned to camp he had hardly touched his supper, and seemed moody and ill at ease; but at last seeing that his conduct attracted attention, he threw off his manner of reverie, and taking his banjo from the tent began to play and sing.

He soon had a crowd around him, and never had he sung better, or appeared more jolly, and soon the visit of Fred Forrester to him was almost forgotten.

From that time on he had seemed to be the very life of the train, and after being a week on the trail, when one night he failed to appear in camp all were most anxious regarding him.

He was known to be pretty well able to take care of himself, and had often before ridden off alone on the prairies or in the mountains, but had always been promptly on hand when the time to go into camp came.

Now he was missing, and the night set in dark and stormy.

Then, too, the dangerous country was not yet passed through, or a settlement had been raided by Indians only the day before, a courier on the way to the fort had told them, and a scout, met on the trail, stated that the stage to the mining-camp of Goodhold had been held up by road-agents two days before.

Not a man in the train, excepting perhaps Lieutenant Castleman and the guide would have been so much missed as was the Boy Bugler, for he had become popular with all, and his singing with the banjo and playing his bugle and cornet had won the way to the hearts of all.

Lieutenant Castleman, as in duty bound, had written a report back to General Carr by the courier they met, of the visit of Captain Fred Forrester to the camp the first night out, and given other details of the march.

Now, when night came on he was greatly worried at the mysterious disappearance of the bugler.

It had been the custom of Billie Blue to lead his own pack-horse and look pretty much after himself.

He was well-mounted, and his pack-horse was equally as good an animal as the one he bestrode.

He carried a small "A" tent, which the bugler occupied alone, and an outfit that was complete, along with a banjo and guitar-box, his bugle and cornet-cases, a sachel of clothes, cooking utensils and all else that was useful to a borderman.

The pack-horse was well-trained to follow, and, if not made fast to some ambulance or wagon, when his master went off on a jaunt from the train invariably trotted after him.

In fact, the Boy Bugler seemed anxious to have his belongings always with him, and seldom in his rides left the pack-horse with the train.

On this afternoon he had left soon after leaving the noon halting-ground, and his pack-horse had followed him.

If lost, he would at most not suffer during the night, as he had all with him to make him comfortable, so there was no fear for him on that score in spite of the storm.

But the dread was that he had run upon a band of Indians, or gang of white marauders.

In that case he would be found rich picking, for all in the train knew that the Boy Bugler had money, though they did not suspect him of having the very large sum that he carried with him.

That he was other than a handsome lad not a soul in the camp suspected, and he had passed muster as a boy in the fort also.

Had it been known that the handsome young bugler was a woman, the anxiety in the train would have been great indeed.

Lieutenant Castleman sent for his guide and scout, and asked them regarding their ideas of the missing youth, and if it was possible for a search-party to go out that night.

The reply of all was unanimous that it was useless, for in the darkness and storm they could discover nothing; but the next morning at dawn, if he would halt for a day, they would go on the trail of the missing youth.

And the next morning seven men well mounted, set forth in search of the Boy Bugler, while the train remained in camp.

It was night when they returned, and it was with sad faces they entered camp, for they had a cruel story to tell.

They had found back on the trail some twenty miles, the body of the Boy Bugler, his clothes torn, his handsome face scarred beyond recognition, by coyotes feasting upon him, and in his side several Indian arrows, while the scalp had been torn from the head.

Of course the horses and all else were gone; but the tracks showed that half a dozen horsemen had met the youth, red-skins beyond a doubt, and though the trail was followed for several miles, the storm of the night before had come on and washed away all trace.

So the searchers returned with their sorrowful story, and the next day the train pulled out on its way, all deeply pained at the cruel fate of the Boy Bugler.

CHAPTER XVIII.

BUFFALO BILL'S LEAGUE.

SO secretly had the orders been given for the men to leave the fort and go to the rendezvous appointed by Buffalo Bill, that not one of the soldiers knew what was expected of them.

Arriving at the appointed place, they found there the scout awaiting them, and as each separate party came up they were more and more filled with wonder at what was expected of them.

The scout had his pack-horses with him, and when the sergeant, two corporals and twenty-four men had all reported, he said, in his free-and-easy way:

"Men, you have been detached at my request from your separate commands, and General Carr has given me the command of you for an indefinite time."

"You all know me well, so are aware that I need your services for no wild goose chase."

"I know you, and I do not mean to flatter you by saying that I *picked my men*, so the work before us is to be accomplished, without failure."

"What that work is, you shall soon understand; but now we will go to a retreat which I have selected in the mountains, and we have here on these pack-animals ample stores and ammunition, and you can make yourselves comfortable in camp."

"You are all brave men, thoroughly armed, splendidly mounted, and I feel that you will all do your duty."

"Mount and follow me."

There was not a man but wanted to cheer this speech, and yet discipline prevented, and silence was even more impressive.

Through the hours of the night the soldiers followed their daring leader, who, just after dawn, came to a halt in what was a valley surrounded by lofty hills with precipitous sides, and through which ran a swift-flowing stream. It was indeed a canyon that widened into a valley, and the head of it was against a lofty ridge over which the stream tumbled with mighty roar, forming a fine fall.

The entrance to the valley was through a narrow pass, and the range of hills on either side would not admit of approach on horseback.

There was ample timber in the valley for wood, and the water was ice-cold and clear as crystal, and grass grew luxuriantly.

"Men, we camp here, so make yourselves as comfortable as you can, for this may be your home for weeks."

So said Buffalo Bill, and the soldiers took him at his word, first erecting a snug wicky-up for the scout and the sergeant.

When all was ready in camp, Buffalo Bill called his men together and made known to them the work he had in hand.

"It is too far to the fort to go for help, when I need it, so I asked General Carr to give me a company of Boys in Blue to call upon for work when the time comes."

"I picked you because I knew I could depend upon the last one of you, and you are to camp here, under command of Sergeant Inge, and be ready to move at a moment's notice."

"There is game in plenty near at hand, and your horses also will be well cared for, but I wish no man to be far away from the valley, by day or night, for when I need you, I will need you in a hurry and very much."

"I made a lot of whistles, and here is one for each man, and they can be heard over a mile away, and I will give you the signals I have decided upon for a call for help, or a rally, or retreat."

"The work I have before me is to capture Snow Face, the Renegade White Chief of the Sioux, also Captain Brimstone, who I know is reorganizing another band of outlaws, and to see if we cannot discover the truth about this unfortunate affair with which gallant Captain Forrester is connected."

"I believe you all, with me, believe him inno-

cent, but appearances have been so strong against him that his friends and brother officers, with their families, those who should trust him most, with few exceptions will persist that he is guilty, and if we can prove that he is not, it will be something for us to remember with pride.

"Now, my Boys in Blue, I shall start alone on a scout to-night, and will leave you here to await my coming, or sending for you.

"The work before us may be dangerous in the extreme, desperate at times, and if there is a man here who wishes to return to the fort and not take the risk, he can do so, and nothing shall be said of it to his detriment, for this may be considered like a forlorn hope, in which I wish volunteers alone.

"Does any man present wish to withdraw from my League of Boys in Blue?"

Not a man answered, not a man flinched.

Buffalo Bill had picked his men well.

"I am glad to see that I made no mistake, and I am proud of your trust in me.

"Now, Boys in Blue, you know what is before you," and the scout dismissed his soldiers, who were glad of the opportunity to a man to go with him in an undertaking of danger out of which good was to come.

When Buffalo Bill rode out of the canyon on that night, he went prepared for the worst, for he knew the full peril before him.

His trail led him to the mountain cabin of Tenderfoot Tom.

CHAPTER XIX.

IN A TRAP.

THE disguised woman, who went under the name of Billie Blew, the Boy Bugler, had her own reasons for not leaving her pack-horse in camp, when she went off for a ride alone on the prairie, and as she had the animal well trained to follow her, and she did not expect to go far, no one suspected a secret motive in the act.

The truth was that there were things in that pack which she did not wish seen, and she did not know but what some one might rob her, in her absence, and in doing so make a discovery which she would not have known under any circumstances.

The morning that she went off on the ride, from which she did not return in the evening, her pack-horse, as usual had followed, trotting at the heels of the animal she rode.

Billie Blew had seemed to wish to be alone, to meditate.

Speaking of the woman as her masculine garb and name demands, I will say he was plotting for the future, and it was when he was riding alone by day his thoughts were the busiest.

At night, so great was the control of the bugler over himself, that he would not lie awake, thus breaking his rest and losing strength; but no matter what the worry of mind, it would be dismissed and slumber would come.

But by day the thoughts were busy, and the bugler plotted and plotted.

On the day in question he was riding along toward a stream which was bordered by cottonwoods and willows.

The train was some six miles away, running parallel with the trail the bugler was following, but no one was in sight, and the stream presented a tempting resting-place at noon.

Suddenly, out of the cottonwoods dashed several horsemen, and they rode at once down upon the bugler.

He was surprised, almost dazed for an instant, but quickly rallied, fired his rifle and was turning to fly, when a whirring sound was heard, and over the head of the horse he bestrode, as well as over the pack-animal, descended the coil of a lariat.

Out of the strip of timber where they had been concealed, camping in ambush on the trail, dashed four men on foot.

They ran to the horses of the bugler, seized them, and in an instant he had been dragged from the saddle.

He was very pale, but seeing resistance was useless, had made none, other than to fire the one shot, which had seemed to miss its aim.

But just then one of the four men uttered a cry, pressed his hand upon his side and fell in his tracks.

"My God! pards, I'm done for!"

The other turned toward him, for they seemed to feel their game had been trapped and was safe.

He gasped forth a few words, unintelligible, but in which the words were heard:

"Mother warned me—"

Then his head sunk upon the prairie-grass and he was dead.

He was a young man, almost a boy, for his face was beardless, and his form was slight.

Gazing at him as he lay there dead upon the prairie, one could not but wonder how it was that he had become the comrade of men such as he had been found with.

His was not the face of a villain, and he had not grown old in sin, though he had been found in bad company.

He was roughly dressed in buckskin leggings and woollen shirt, and a slouch hat fitted tightly upon his head, while about his waist was a belt

with a revolver and knife, and another weapon he held in his hand even in death.

The bullet of the bugler had been well-aimed, and had pierced his side, while he even had not felt its deadly sting for the moment in his excitement, and the others had not believed him hit.

"Pards, ther kid got it ter kill," said one of the three, and he was a man whose face caused the bugler to regret that he had not been the one to catch her bullet.

"Yas, and he w'd hev made a dandy agent, hadn't he been cut off in his prime," remarked another, while the third said with a sigh:

"Waal, maybe it are best, fer he hev been saved a heap o' trouble, pain and heart-burts."

"Don't yer go ter preachin' ter us, Parson Paul, for this ain't no time for sermonizin'."

"Ther kid are dead, so all I has ter say is poor feller, and I guess ther will be mournin' fer him whar he lives."

"But we has a young gerlout here that needs lookin' arter, fer he are dangerous, I guesses, and he hev already showed his claws in killin' Kid Dickie."

"He do look like a game one, are prutty enough fer a gal, and carries a pack like a peddler."

"Now, sonny, jist come inter ther cottonwoods yonder with us and let us git acquainted."

There was nothing for it but to obey, and the bugler did not hesitate, but dismounted at the command of the one who appeared to be leader, surrendered his belt of arms, and walked on to the cottonwoods that fringed the stream.

The other two men followed with his horse and the pack-animal.

Arriving in the shelter of the timber, the prisoner saw there five horses, all good animals, and four of them saddled and bridled, while the fifth was used to carry a pack.

The outlaws, for such they had proven themselves, had been making a noonday halt there when they beheld the bugler coming across the prairie, and they at once laid in ambush for him, as he was on the trail that led to the ford near where they were.

They had commented upon who and what he was, while he was at a distance, but as he came nearer, saw by his uniform that he was a soldier, and, as he carried a pack-animal with him, came to the conclusion that they had a very rich haul to make.

They were a hard lot, the trio, their faces stamped with evil indelibly, in striking contrast to their youthful comrade, whose face lay upturned upon the prairie a few paces away, the seal of death upon it.

From them the prisoner felt that no mercy was to be expected, for he read aright that they were merciless, and meant to rob, perhaps to take his life, so thoroughly was he in their power.

But defiant, fearless-faced, though pale, the young prisoner, whom they little dreamed to be a woman, awaited the dread ordeal of an unknown fate.

CHAPTER XX.

THE RIGHT OR THE WRONG MAN.

TENDERFOOT TOM'S acquaintance with the Man in Black, who made himself known as Captain Brimstone, of the Brimstone Brotherhood, was certainly against him so far as holding a position of trust under the Overland Company, and being the intimate friend, as it seemed, of outlaws.

The two men talked together until late into the night, there in that lonely cabin, and the result was a compact formed for further devilry to take place on the border.

Captain Brimstone had been surprised and defeated, by the treachery, he felt assured, of one of the Brimstone Brotherhood; but he had set his heart upon gaining a certain sum of money, and this, as he could not accomplish it by honorable means, must be gotten through lawless methods.

He had gone off after his defeat, disappeared as Captain Brimstone, giving it out even that the chief of the Brotherhood had been slain; but he had reappeared in the disguise of a *colporteur*, or border preacher, and as such meant to reorganize his broken firm "for business," as he expressed it.

There was one thing which Captain Brimstone was anxious to do, and that was to find the man who had been known as the "Deserter Sergeant."

His career had been a gallant one as a soldier, but a fast and reckless one as a man, and the end had come in murder, desertion and outlawry.

The strange and striking resemblance between the Deserter Sergeant and the famous scout, Buffalo Bill, had caused many thrilling mistakes, and as Captain Brimstone owed his life to the former, he had gotten him to join the Brimstone Brotherhood.

The very first mission he had sent him upon was to win over Snow Face, the renegade chief of the Sioux, as his ally, and upon this occasion the two men, Buffalo Bill and the Deserter Sergeant, had met on the trail in the moonlight, and the victory rested with the scout.

There were scenes in the past life of the De-

serter Sergeant, in which Buffalo Bill had figured, and once the two had been friends.

When dying, with the scout whose bullet had given him his death-wound seated by his side, the Deserter had made a confession, and Cody, with his usual reckless daring, had determined to impersonate the man whom he so closely resembled.

With his horse, arms and clothing he had played the Deserter well, and had gone to see Snow Face, the Renegade, and afterward had met the Brimstone Brotherhood at their retreat.

Though suspected, he had passed muster, and was made the courier of three separate bands of outlaws under Captain Brimstone.

The result was his plot to overthrow them, and he had done so; but that he was not suspected he had no idea, and believed that the secret of his having impersonated the dead Deserter must be known.

Under this belief he knew that he must act cautiously, and so he got the backing of the Boys in Blue for the work he had in hand, and, after taking them to their rendezvous, he started out upon his first trail to accomplish the end he had in view, and, in truth, had pledged himself to.

It was a little after sunrise when he rode up the trail leading to the cabin of Tenderfoot Tom.

That worthy and his guest, having sat up until after midnight, had not been in a hurry to arise, so had just gotten breakfast ready when Tenderfoot Tom, who constantly kept his eyes down on the trail, said, quickly:

"Pard Cap'n, thar are a horseman a-comin'."

"Don't call me captain, Tom, for some day you may make a mistake."

"I am Parson Providence, and don't you forget it."

"All right, parson; I'll stick a pin in my memory to keep it thar; but does yer know who thet are?"

And Tenderfoot Tom had his glass leveled at the stranger.

"No."

"Waal, it are Buf'ler Bill."

"The deuce you say!"

"Yas; it are Bill, or it are ther Deserter."

"I hope it is Cody, for I owe him one, and will—"

"Hold on, pard, for in ther fu'st place parsons don't do no killin', and secondly, yer can't kill Cody at this ranch, fer it would leak out and we'd do only harm by it."

"You are right, Tom; but may it not be my man, the sergeant?"

"Waal, it may, and may be not, for them fellers looks enough alike as two bowies, and it's dangerous ter resemble any man so close."

"Well, we will soon know; but if it is the scout?"

"I'll have ter treat him prime."

"He has been here before?"

"Oh yas, fer he gits around ef it's Buf'ler Bill."

"If it is the sergeant, so much the better for me, for he is a valuable man and no mistake."

"Don't give yerself away too soon, pard; but will yer go inter hidin'?"

"No, indeed, for if it is the sergeant I am all right, and if you didn't recognize me in my disguise, I am not afraid any one else will."

"Buf'ler Bill hev got awful keen eyes."

"I'll risk it, and if he does, why, then it must be his life or mine, for I am not to be taken alive, Tom, and if it comes to trouble between us, why, you are not to blame, you know."

"I don't want no trouble here, but at ther same time I doesn't want yer caught and hanged, so we'll jist wait and see how ther lead pans out."

"It are Buf'ler Bill, I is sart'in."

"And I am equally sure it is my man, the sergeant," was the answer of Parson Providence, as the outlaw captain was pleased to call himself.

While Tenderfoot Tom went on with the preparations for breakfast, the outlaw looked to his weapons and took a position near the door of the cabin, ready for war, if war it must be, or peace if the coming man should, as he hoped it would be, prove to be the Deserter Sergeant.

Slowly toward the cabin rode the man under suspicion, and it was not long before he drew rein before the door.

He was on his guard against surprise, that was certain, and his dark, piercing eyes fell full upon the face of Tenderfoot Tom, then upon that of the disguised outlaw.

What he read there, not an expression of his face revealed; but he said in a cheery kind of way:

"Hallo, Tenderfoot, how goes it?"

Tenderfoot Tom was still puzzled.

Was he to address Buffalo Bill or the Deserter Sergeant?

The greeting was strangely like the scout's cheery way.

But he answered, cautiously:

"It goes all right, pard; but whar is yer from?"

Buffalo Bill saw his hesitation and his quick

glance at the other, and he was a man who read quickly, and he knew that Tenderfoot Tom was not sure that it was he.

If he had been, his manner would have been different, and this implied that he at least did not know the Deserter Sergeant was dead.

So he responded:

"Oh, I've been dodging about, and came to breakfast with you, Pard Tom; but I didn't know you had company."

"Yes, I has, and he's a sky pilot, as yer see, and I'll interdooce yer, fer he may convert yer out o' yer sinful ways."

"Parson Providence, this are my friend, Pard—Pard—durned ef I hain't let yer name slip off my tongue, pard, I has, fer a fact, well as I knows yer."

"Sergeant Benson," said the scout, calmly, and his eyes seemed to be upon the face of each man as he uttered the words, and his hands dangerously near his revolver butts.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE SCOUT HOLDS TRUMP CARDS.

BUFFALO BILL saw the expression of relief upon the face of each man, as he uttered the name of Sergeant Benson, and it taught him a great deal.

He had long been suspicious of Tenderfoot Tom, believing that he was living a double life, yet he had never been able to get the slightest clew against him.

Was he now to do so? He had, at a glance, seen only an itinerant preacher in the companion of the station-agent; but it seemed that he was to find him out to be more.

At a venture he had said Sergeant Benson.

If Tenderfoot Tom had been a true man, then was his chance to attempt the capture of the self-confessed murderer, deserter and outlaw, and the parson would also show great surprise if not horror.

Instead, Tom had smiled and the parson had looked pleased, and the expression on the faces of both were not lost upon the scout.

"Waal, pard, me and my friend ther parson, here, are ter hev a leetle breakfast, so jist help us in ther feed, won't yer?"

Buffalo Bill readily accepted the invitation of Tenderfoot Tom, and he at once saw that the station agent's friend was playing a part, and this was made convincing by the remark that followed from the pretended preacher.

"Well, sergeant, as long as we believed you to be Buffalo Bill, we had to be shady; but now we know you as you are we might as well speak out."

"So say I, pard; but let me congratulate you upon your escape from the soldiers, for I think I can penetrate your disguise."

"Indeed! who am I?" and Parson Providence winked at Tenderfoot Tom and smiled.

"You are one of the Brimstone Brotherhood."

"Granted, but do you know which one?"

"Not exactly."

"How did you know me as a Brimstone?"

"From your brand."

"Ah! this brand upon my wrist," and the man revealed a brand in india ink, of a red torch with a bluish flame, and the letters

"B. B."

"Yes, I have one like it," the scout said, and then the other remarked:

"Well, sergeant, nearly all the boys branded that night in our retreat by you have passed in their chips, as you doubtless are aware, and the rest are scattered."

"I really thought you had gone under, and was asking Tenderfoot Tom about you, so you may know how glad I am to see you, for you were my best man."

The words, "my best man," quickly caught the ear of the scout, and yet his face revealed no sign as he continued:

"The captain, as I live! but who is he?"

"Can he be Gambler Gaul?"

"I must know."

Such were the thoughts that flashed through the brain of Buffalo Bill, and yet he said, calmly:

"Which way did you go, captain, after the attack?"

"You know me as Captain Brimstone then, sergeant?"

"Yes, sir."

"And who else am I?"

"I cannot place you as other than the captain, sir, and only recognized you as such from your remark complimenting me as your best man."

"Ah, yes, and so you were, and I feared you had been killed."

"What became of you?"

"I was taken with the soldiers, sir, but escaped."

"You were indeed fortunate, for there are several rewards set upon your head."

"Yes, sir; as deserter, murderer and outlaw, with orders to shoot me without mercy, or, capturing me, to hang me without trial."

"Well, I congratulate you upon your escape, and it was doubtless a bold one."

"No; I had a friend among the soldiers who helped me, though it was a close call, sir; but how did you get away?"

"My usual good luck, after I saw that all was lost."

"I went East, changed my appearance, and am back here once more to start on the gold-trails, and so came to look my old pard, Tenderfoot Tom, up, and see if he could help me find the few men that are left; but it's lucky I found you, sergeant."

"And glad I am to find you, sir, though I shall have to keep close until after we get a band, for Buffalo Bill is on my trail."

"Yes; and I am determined to end the career of Buffalo Bill, for the sooner he is out of the way the better will it be for us."

"There is no doubt of that, sir; but have you decided upon your plans?"

"Well, Tom and I have talked it over, and—"

"Tom is one of us, then?"

"Well, a silent partner only, for he still keeps his place here, as he can aid us the more."

"It will change my plans, your coming, so I will have you look up a new retreat, not over a score of miles from here, and I will get the men and send them to Tom, who will then direct them to you, and you can take charge of the camp until I come."

"All right, sir; but will you mask the men this time?"

"Yes; it is better so, for I care not to be known as I really am, though I must know every man and all about him in my band."

"Now tell me: do you really know me as other than Captain Brimstone?"

"No, captain, I do not," was the frank response; but the outlaw chief did not hear the scout's muttered:

"But I will know you as you are, my gallant captain."

And so it was arranged, the pretended parson departing during the day to look up his men for the reorganization of his outlaw band, and the scout going to seek a retreat and then return and make its exact locality known to Tenderfoot Tom, who was to be the spy of the outlaws.

Knowing the country perfectly as he did, Buffalo Bill hastily selected a retreat, and then rode with all haste back to his rendezvous, where the soldiers awaited him.

He found a sentinel on duty and all going well, and he quickly explained to his Boys in Blue that affairs were working just into their hands.

Then he sat down in his tent and wrote a note to General Carr, which was as follows, but in cipher:

"DEAR GENERAL:—"

"Luck is on my side, and all goes well for us."

"I have the boys in a snug camp, ready at hand when I need them."

"Captain Brimstone was not killed, but escaped and went East, but returned and is reorganizing his band."

"By rare good fortune I was again mistaken for the Deserter Sergeant, so am playing my old game and am in full confidence once more."

"This time there shall be no mistake, and the Brimstone Brotherhood and Snow Face, the Renegade, shall be entrapped."

"The corporal who bears this will bring reply."

"With respect,

"CODY."

That night the corporal who was to bear the note left the retreat for the fort, and Buffalo Bill knew that he was a thorough plainsman, and would go through if any man could.

Soon after the scout departed, and this time he went with no desire to disguise himself as he wished to be known as Buffalo Bill on this trail.

Altogether so far the daring scout held trump cards, and was playing them to win his desperate game.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE CORPORAL'S DISCOVERY.

CORPORAL CARTER was an old plainsman, and in selecting him as a courier Buffalo Bill had confidence in his letter to General Carr reaching its destination.

The corporal had been a frontiersman from boyhood, and had only entered the army after the breaking up his home by the Indians, and from a desire for revenge.

He had begun as a scout, but for gallant services had been made a corporal and accepted the rank.

Starting off with his letter the corporal was well mounted and armed, and knew the country well through which he had to make his way.

He made his noonday camp on the following day in a clump of timber, and was about to indulge in a short nap when he beheld a horseman approaching the stream which he was on the bank of.

A close scrutiny revealed a horseman and a pack-animal following.

He was in uniform, the corporal could see, and he was about to mount and ride forth to meet him when shots rung out and four men dashed from the fringe of river that followed the course of the stream.

The corporal was surprised, and his first thought was to dash to the rescue of the man in uniform, but he was cautious and so refrained from making matters worse by going to the aid of one whom he did not know, where the odds were against him.

So Corporal Carter remained in hiding, though he saddled his horse and was ready for what might turn up for him.

From his position he knew that if the captors of the horseman, for he had seen that he had been taken, left their retreat, they must pass along the trail near him, or go back the way he had come.

In the latter case he would follow their trail until night and see who it was they had taken, and if a rescue could be made.

If they came along the trail near his position he could see them distinctly, and unless they rode into the timber he would not be discovered, so could recognize the prisoner as a soldier.

If they came into the timber, why, then, he would open fire and perhaps be able to better the captors of the horseman, and certainly make his escape if they proved too many for him in the surprise he would give them.

So Corporal Carter awaited developments from his point of vantage.

He had not long to wait before he saw the party of horsemen emerge from the timber and come toward him.

Instantly he led his horse back under the shelter of the bank and tied him there, for he could dash along under the shelter of the banks for half a mile and then cross the stream at a ford he knew well, if forced to fly.

Then he retraced his way to the clump of trees near the trail, and lay in wait for the coming horsemen and their prisoner.

The trail led within a hundred yards of him, and gave him a good view, and he determined to take advantage of it.

He saw four horsemen and three led horses, two of the latter bearing packs, and one of these he knew belonged to the prisoner.

The latter was riding alone, with one man ahead of him, another close behind, and a third following with the led horses.

The appearance of the three captors of the one in uniform stamped them as of an evil character, and the corporal knew that the prisoner had fallen into evil hands.

He nailed one of them, and they planted him back yonder.

"Wonder if I dare attack the other three?"

The corporal muttered the words, seemed to carefully survey the situation, and then very wisely shook his head.

As they drew nearer, he said aloud:

"It's the Boy Bugler they've got, by all that's good!"

"They have caught him wandering from the train that started East."

The face of the corporal showed for an instant a determination to attempt a bold rescue; but again his good common sense warned him that, though he might kill one of the men, he would be worsted, and perhaps the prisoner would be shot, too.

So he remained in hiding while the party passed, and what he heard of their conversation as they went by, told him that two of the men were in favor of killing the Boy Bugler then and there, but the third man objected.

His objections seemed to have some weight with the others, for when opposite the corporal's hiding-place, they turned to the right-about and retraced their way over the trail.

"That settles it; they go to the mountains, and it's farewell to the boy, I fear."

"I must hasten on to the fort, and report my discovery."

So saying, the corporal returned to his horse, mounted and pushed on at a swinging gallop for Fort Fairview.

Taps had sounded when he arrived, and yet he went at once to the quarters of General Carr, who had with him Colonel Cassidy, who had arrived from the South that afternoon.

When the corporal's name was sent in, the general at once had him admitted, and, taking the letter, read it slowly, after which he said:

"When did you leave Cody, corporal?"

"Yesterday, sir."

"You have made a good ride of it."

"I hurried, sir, to report to you that while in camp to-day I saw a horseman in uniform and with a pack-animal, ambushed by four outlaws, who captured him, though he killed one."

"I was too far off to warn him, and the odds were too great, sir, to attempt a rescue; but they passed near my camp afterwards, and I recognized their prisoner as Billie Blew, the Boy Bugler."

The general fairly sprung to his feet, and cried:

"Can this be so, corporal?"

"It is, sir."

"Why she—I mean he went East with Castleman's train three days ago?"

"Yes, sir, but he doubtless strayed from it."

"And he was captured by those men?"

"Yes, sir, and they mean him no good, I am certain."

The general called his orderly and sent him for Captain Fred Forrester, and that officer soon appeared and heard the corporal's story.

His face flushed, then paled at what he heard, and he asked promptly:

"Have I your permission, General Carr, to take a squad of men and go to the rescue of the unfortunate bugler?"

Before General Carr could reply a courier was announced from Lieutenant Castleman's train.

CHAPTER XXIII. FOUND AND LOST.

GENERAL CARR took the dispatches brought by the courier, and turned first to the letter written him by Lieutenant Walter Castleman who commanded the train.

He raised his eyebrows in surprise as he read the letter, and before replying to the request of Captain Forrester to go to the rescue of the Boy Bugler asked:

"When did you see this bugler last, Captain Forrester?"

"The night after the train left camp, sir, for I overtook it, having some business of importance with one of the parties going East."

"You can go with a squad, sir, in pursuit of these outlaw captors of the bugler, and I hope you may rescue him."

"First learn from Corporal Carter just where he was taken."

"I'll exchange horses, general, and return at once, as Buffalo Bill ordered me, so I can show the captain, sir, for we will get there after sun-up."

"All right, sir."

"Captain Forrester, Corporal Carter will join you in an hour at your quarters."

Fred Forrester took this as a dismissal and retired, the eyes of Colonel Cassidy fixed upon him with a peculiar look, and when he had departed the colonel said:

"That is young Forrester upon whom such a cloud has fallen?"

"Yes, colonel, but I did not present him to you to-night, intending to have a talk with you first about him."

"But let me say now that in spite of the mystery that persistently dogs his steps, and appearances that all is not right, I believe him a wronged and persecuted man, and he is as true as steel, while no better soldier is there in the army."

"I am glad to hear you say this, general, for the face of Forrester caused me to like him; but do not let me interfere with your work, please."

"I have only, sir, to write a note to Cody, who is best known here as Buffalo Bill, and is my chief of scouts."

"He is at present upon a special work of Secret Service duty in fact, and I placed under him a sergeant, two corporals and twenty-four men, and Corporal Carter here is just from him with a letter."

"This Buffalo Bill I have never met, general, but from all I have heard of him he must be a phenomenon."

"He is, sir, and a wonderful man, as you will discover before he has been long under your command, if he returns from his present perilous detective work, for it is nothing else."

And turning to his desk General Carr hastily wrote a few lines to Buffalo Bill, urging him against being too reckless, and regretting that he had again attempted to play the desperate part of the Deserter Sergeant, a man who was dead.

The corporal was then told to get his supper and what he could and report to Captain Forrester, and General Carr turned to his guest, for such Colonel Cassidy was until he took command, and told him as much as he deemed necessary of Fred Forrester the outcast officer, and of the Secret Service work of Buffalo Bill.

In the mean time Corporal Carter, having had a good supper and short rest, mounted a fresh horse and rode to the quarters of Captain Forrester who was awaiting him.

Two scouts and a dozen well-mounted troopers, picked men, were before the captain's quarters, and when Corporal Carter reported, the young officer at once came out, threw himself into the saddle and led the way out of the fort.

He set the pace at a good trot, and did not halt until nearly dawn.

Then he gave his men an hour's rest and breakfast, and once more pushed on, the corporal and two scouts in the lead.

The sun was a couple of hours high when the retreat of the corporal was reached, and the trail of the outlaws was at once taken.

Here Corporal Carter left the troopers, striking off for the retreat of Buffalo Bill's Boys in Blue, but giving no hint as to where he was going or the nature of his mission, not even to Fred Forrester.

While the two scouts took up the trail of the outlaw captors of Billie Blew, a trail now twenty-four hours old, Fred Forrester eagerly watched the gathering clouds which threatened a storm, and his face grew dark and clouded.

Ere the spot was reached where the capture had been made, the rain descended in torrents, and upon the arrival of the troopers at the newly-made grave on the river-bank a halt was called, for every shadow of a trail had been washed out.

The corporal had said that one of the outlaws, he thought, had been killed, so this must be his grave, Fred Forrester decided.

He had also said that the outlaws had doubled upon their trail, but where they had gone from

there it was impossible to know, for no trace of a trail had the rain left.

The downpour still continued, and, as to follow the outlaws blindly was time thrown away, after a moment of thought Captain Forrester decided to go to the Overland Trail and overtake the train once more and thus discover if the Boy Bugler was really missing.

The question asked by General Carr had told him that Lieutenant Castleman had reported his coming to the first night's camp, as in fact he had confessed.

But the train could not, traveling as slow as it must, and detained by the storm, be more than forty miles away, so he would overtake it and know all about the Boy Bugler's leaving as he had, and why.

The thought flashed into his mind that the daring woman had been on her way back to the fort, and if so she could have but one purpose.

He must know all. He regretted her capture, and dreaded the worst, but he would do all in his power to rescue her when he knew the truth. So after the train he rode, keeping his horses at a good pace through the driving rain.

They struck the Overland trail and went into camp for a few hours' rest; but once more pressed on at nightfall, and toward dawn came in sight of the distant glimmer of camp-fires, burning dimly in the misty air, for the storm was only then breaking away.

CHAPTER XXIV. DEAD OR ALIVE.

THE sentinel on duty in the East-bound wagon-train sounded an alarm, when in the early morning's dawn he beheld a party of horsemen coming toward the camp.

They might expect an attack from Indians or road-agents, and so it was best to be prepared.

As the party of horsemen drew nearer they found the encampment aroused and all ready to receive foes if foes they proved to be.

But out over the prairie rung the clear voice of Fred Forrester:

"Castleman's camp ho! we are a squad from the fort!"

He was just in time to escape being fired upon, and Lieutenant Castleman said:

"There is only one voice in the army like that—it is Forrester."

"What has brought him after us again, I wonder?"

Then he ordered the sentinel to bid the men advance, and going to his tent was joined a few minutes after by Fred Forrester.

He arose and saluted his superior, but with a marked coldness of manner.

Unheeding this, however, Captain Forrester said abruptly:

"Lieutenant Castleman, I am sent by General Carr in search of Bugler Billie Blew, so please make report of his leaving your train."

"The boy is dead, sir."

"Dead!" and the firelight revealed that Forrester's face turned livid, while he bit his lips nervously.

"Yes, he was in the habit of riding off by himself during the march, and always had his pack-horse follow him."

"The day after your visit to him he disappeared, or rather did not come in at night, so I sent a search-party after him in the morning while I remained encamped."

"They discovered where he had been ambushed and robbed, and so returned to report to me."

"You are sure that he was killed?"

"Oh, yes, for his body was found, and identified."

"Who ambushed him?"

"It was a band of outlaws, I am sure, but they tried to lead to the belief that Indians had done the deed."

"But they were four outlaws."

"Ah! you know the number?" and Lieutenant Castleman felt a glow of suspicion flush his cheek, after the visit of Forrester to his camp to see the Boy Bugler, that perhaps he knew all about the death of Billie Blew.

If Fred Forrester noticed the manner of the officer, he did not show it, but replied:

"A courier with dispatches, on his way to the fort, saw from a hiding-place the attack of four outlaws upon the bugler, and he thought one of the men had been killed."

"They afterward passed near his retreat with their prisoner, and there were but three outlaws."

"Then they turned back and disappeared on the trail, so if the bugler was killed, it was afterward, and yet what became of the fourth man?"

Lieutenant Castleman felt puzzled at this report of the officer, and yet he could not but connect Captain Forrester in some way with the missing youth.

"It was reported to me that the bugler's body was found near the scene of a skirmish, and hastily buried, and more I do not know."

"I delayed the train a day to make the search, and have had to delay another day on account of the storm."

"As you have been sent in search of Bugler Blew, I shall trouble myself no more about it, Captain Forrester, but press on with the train."

"Will you remain and breakfast with me, Captain Forrester?"

It evidently cost Lieutenant Castleman a struggle to extend this invitation to one whom all regarded as branded with guilt though proclaimed innocent by a court-martial, and he dreaded that Forrester would accept, so was relieved at the reply:

"Thank you, no, for I shall return on the trail at once."

"Have you any word to send to General Carr?"

"My report only of the bugler's disappearance and supposed death."

"I will make the report, sir."

"Good-morning, Lieutenant Castleman," and throwing himself into his saddle Fred Forrester rode away, his men following with regret, for they had hoped that he would remain to breakfast in the train encampment.

After going a couple of miles, the officer halted his men for rest and breakfast, and to dry out their uniforms.

They noticed that he seemed more stern than was his wont, and appeared in no hurry to go on his way.

It was evident to them that he had heard something regarding the Boy Bugler which had caused him to feel that further search for him was useless, and they had been told also by the men of the train that Billie Blew had been killed by the outlaws.

It was afternoon when, rested and refreshed, the order was given to mount and continue on their way, and the sun was near the horizon when the party drew rein at the grove on the river-bank, the scene of the outlaws' attack upon the bugler.

"Men, I wish this grave opened," said Fred Forrester.

And in obedience to the order the soldiers set to work with what means they could, and the body at last appeared in the bottom of the grave.

"Hold! that is enough."

And the officer knelt by the grave and gazed down upon the form lying there yet half-hidden by the loose earth.

"It's the poor boy, sir, for I recognize his clothes, though his face seems to have been beaten terribly," said the sergeant.

"Yes, beyond recognition; but the clothes are the bugler's, and I think there can be no doubt of his sad fate, while I do not believe we can now find his murderers, for the storm has destroyed all traces of the trails."

"Fill in the grave, men!"

And with another glance at the form in the grave, and with an expression upon his face which the soldiers wondered at yet could not read, Fred Forrester turned away in the gathering gloom, and soon after was leading his men back toward the fort.

The next day they arrived, and Captain Forrester at once sought General Carr.

"Well, Forrester, what news of the bugler?" asked the general, as the young officer entered his quarters.

"I will tell you, sir, just what discovery I made," was the answer.

And the officer told the story of what had occurred after his leaving the fort.

"I was afraid that the storm would destroy all trails, and you did right to overhaul the train, for it proved conclusively that the bugler left and was the one that Corporal Carter said he was."

"Your—I mean, the poor woman met with a sad fate, Forrester; but it has freed you in a manner you little expected."

"If she is dead, sir."

"Do you doubt it?"

"I fear I do, sir."

"Yet you opened the grave?"

"True, sir, and the clothing and appearance indicated that it was she; but the face was bruised and changed, and somehow I doubt that the grave contained the body of Ruby, my unfortunate wife."

"You should have satisfied yourself thoroughly upon that score."

"The men were there, sir, and my examination was but casual; but doubtless it was Ruby."

"I believe there is no doubt of it; but, Forrester, I give an entertainment to Colonel Cassidy to-night, and I wish you to attend."

"Your invitation, General Carr, is like a king's, sir, an order to be obeyed, so I shall pay my respects to you, sir, if I may be excused after meeting Colonel Cassidy."

"Certainly, if you wish, but Major Denton, his wife and Miss Kennerley are to be there, and they are friends of yours."

"Yes, sir, and I appreciate their friendship, when with all others I am an outcast."

"Good-night, General Carr," and the officer departed, his lips sternly set, his eyes with a far-away look of sadness in them that seemed to be deepening each day of his life.

CHAPTER XXV.

SURPRISED IN CAMP.

I WILL now return to Billie Blew, the bugler, who, it will be remembered, was seen by Corporal Carter in the hands of the three outlaws who had ambushed and captured him.

The three men had decided at first to make for the Indian country and kill their prisoner, divide his booty and money, for they had discovered that he had a goodly supply of both with him; but as they moved along, and at the time that Corporal Carter from his retreat had his eye upon them, the prisoner suddenly asked:

"Are you not of the old Brimstone Brotherhood Band?"

"What ef we is, what ef we hain't?" answered Parson Paul cautiously.

"Well, I judge that you are, and in that case you will get into trouble if you kill and rob me."

"How so, young one?"

"I was on my way to see your captain when you captured me."

"Who is our captain?"

"I do not know any more than you do; but I have news for him that will bring him gold and you too."

"The cap'n has skipped, kid, and we is on our own hook now."

"Then you need a leader, so let me be your captain and I will enrich you, I pledge you my word."

The look of surprise that rested upon the face of Parson Paul and Blazes, who heard his words, was ludicrous in the extreme.

They were completely taken aback by the cool proposition of their young prisoner.

"I mean it, men, and certainly you still have me in your power if I don't carry out my pledge."

"You are three to one against me, and I am but a boy; but we need more men, at least six or seven, for the work I want you to do."

"Come, what do you say?"

Parson Paul gave a low whistle and called Crockett up from the rear to hear the proposition of the youth.

He repeated his words coolly, and added:

"Now my plan is to go back to the grave of the man I killed, and rig him up in my clothes, disfiguring his face so that he will be mistaken for me if dug up by those who I know will take my trail."

"I wish to be considered dead, don't you know, and then I will go with you and get more men and begin work."

"I am from the fort, and I know just what I am about, so I can arrange several little games there which will pan out big, for to kidnap one person I know of will pay us ten thousand dollars."

"Then there is other work to do that will pay well, and we can reap a good harvest in gold."

"What do you say, men?"

"I says you is the cheekiest kid I ever struck ther trail of; but I is stuck on yer, and I says what you has perposed goes—yas, it goes," and Parson Paul glanced at Blazes and Crockett, the former at once responding:

"Yas, we can try his leetle game, for he seems squar' in it, and then if it do not pan out big, why we kin jist lift him up to a tree-limb same as we intended."

"I says try him, too," added Crockett.

And the party turned to the right about, greatly to the surprise of Corporal Carter, who did not understand their doubling on their trail.

So back to the scene of attack they went, and the bugler opened his pack-saddle and gave the men a suit of clothes to put upon the dead body of Dickie, the Kid, and they soon had the change made so that the form would readily pass for Billie Blew if not critically examined.

The bugle insignia was upon the left arm, and the clothes were well known as those the boy had worn.

Then the men filled in the grave, and with a close watch upon the bugler, whom they yet suspected, they went upon their way, this time taking the trail toward the mountains where the Brimstone Brotherhood had had their retreat.

The bugler was well aware that he was under suspicion, and yet he was playing a bold game to carry out some plot that had flashed into his mind.

He had kept from being known as other than a supposed youth, and the men had thus far not plundered his pack-saddle or robbed him of his money and jewelry.

They had felt too sure of their prisoner to waste time in robbing him then, and, besides, wished to wait until they were further away from the trails where they might be interrupted by red-skins or soldiers.

So they pressed on toward the hill country, the bugler taking the situation calmly, though with a certain expression upon his face which they could not read.

It was just sunset when they went into camp, and the spot chosen was a good one, a vale in the midst of the hills, and where it seemed that the foot of even the red-skin had never trod.

They went to work to pitch their camp by first staking out their horses, after which Parson Paul built a fire while the other two outlaws collected wood, the bugler seated on a fallen tree meanwhile watching them, for they had taken the precaution to bind him after they had come to a halt for the night.

Parson Paul had blown the fire into a blaze,

when suddenly he heard a step, and, turning, beheld, not Crockett or Blazes, as he had expected, but a tall form clad in black, with smooth-shaven face and wearing spectacles.

Parson Paul was quick on the draw, but the stranger in black already had him covered, and he took the hint and kept his hand off his revolver.

But he cast a quick glance toward the Boy Bugler, to discover that, if he was aware of the coming of the Man in Black, he did not show it, as his gaze was turned down the valley, and had he a desire to come to Parson Paul's aid, he could not, bound hand and foot as he was.

As Blazes and Crockett were out of sight gathering wood, Parson Paul was caught in a trap, and he fully realized the fact.

CHAPTER XXVI.

CLEVERLY CAUGHT.

PARSON PAUL was a man to take a situation coolly, when he saw no hope for himself.

He had nerve, and it did not fail him at this important moment, and his thoughts flashed like lightning through his brain, after this wise:

"I'm treed; but he don't know Crockett and Blazes is around, an' ef they hain't blind, they'll tumble to ther situation and jist act fer ther good o' all; but I are done fer ef they don't."

So he smiled blandly, and said, in what he meant should be a cordial tone:

"How'd ye, pard; I is glad ter see yer."

"You is a miserbul liar, yer man o' sin, fer yer wishes I was dead," came the cool response.

"I hain't nothin' ag'in' yer," said Parson Paul, uneasily, not relishing the manner in which his overtures of friendship had been met.

"I has my revolver ag'in' you, or nigh about, and I draws blood ef yer don't hold up them gold-grabbers o' yours."

"Oh Lordy! up they goes," and Parson Paul raised his hands above his head, while, as he was upon his knees before the fire, his position was one of deep supplication, though inwardly he was swearing in a manner that was the quintessence of profanity.

Startled by the voices, the bugler had looked around, and his face showed surprise at what he beheld.

"Parson Paul, you are my prisoner," said the stranger.

"It do look so, pard."

As if to emphasize his remark, the stranger quietly stepped to the side of the kneeling man, seized one hand and then the other and in an instant had him handcuffed.

"Now sit there and tell me how many more are with you?"

"Two pards."

"You have seven horses."

"You is posted."

"I am, for I have followed your trail an hour or more," and the Man in Black dropped the border dialect in which he had at first spoken.

"Waal, one o' our pards was kilt, by yonder festive gerloot, and t'other two is off lookin' up wood an' a leetle game fer supper."

"Then with the boy yonder there are four of you?"

"Yas, pard."

"You are disarmed and in irons, and the boy you have bound, I see, so I will only have the two to deal with when they come."

"They is terrors, pard."

"Then I shall shoot them at sight."

"They hain't so bad as that; but yer seems ter know me?"

"I do, as one of the blackest villains on this border."

"It do seem ter be a case o' ther pot callin' ther kittle black," and Parson Paul glanced at the Man in Black, who laughed lightly and said:

"I am an humble preacher, and my cloth is black, but your heart is even blacker than the clothing I wear."

"I is suthin' of a preacher myself, or leastwise ther boys calls me parson, so we sh'd be pards."

"Well, that depends on how you obey me."

"Sit right there on that log, and if you or the boy open your mouths, or give a sign of warning to your comrades of my presence here, that moment you will breathe your last."

"I intends ter keep all ther breath I has, Pard Parson," said Parson Paul.

"And you, sir?"

"As I am little more than a prisoner to these men, I certainly will not stand in my own light by giving warning of your presence here, which will doubtless end in my rescue," was the cool reply of the bugler.

"I am not so sure of that; but we will see," and the Man in Black took up his position among the branches of the fallen tree.

Several shots had been heard in the distance, and soon after both Blazes and Crockett appeared coming up the vale, one carrying an antelope and the other a large bundle of dry sticks, for there in the valley the wood was scarce.

As they reached the fire, which was now

brightly burning, suddenly there glided up to them the Man in Black, and sternly came the words:

"Men, you are my prisoners!"

"Resist and you die on the instant!"

"Blue blazes!" cried Blazes, in disgust and amazement commingled, and he dropped the antelope from his shoulders, yet made no effort to draw a weapon, for a revolver in the stranger's right hand covered his heart, while another in the left hand did as much for Crockett.

"Lord ha' marcy! but this are our funeral, an' ther parson hev arrived ter plant us," growled Crockett, as he stood with the huge load of wood wrapped in the lariat and fastened to his back.

"I say, Blazes, that you and Crockett are my prisoners."

"Do you surrender?"

"You is that persuadin', pard, we hain't ther heart ter refuse yer," replied Blazes, whom a quick glance over at the fallen tree had shown how Parson Paul was situated.

"I sings ther same tune, Pard Parson, fer ef yer hain't a sky pilot, yer looks it," Crockett rejoined.

"You are wise, and as you have surrendered and I have taken in the outfit I can afford to be merciful, so I'll stay to supper with you and take the irons off Parson Paul."

"But I didn't think three of the old Brimstone Brotherhood could be taken in so easily as I have done for you."

And the Man in Black laughed, while Parson Paul, who had heard all, called out:

"Who in thunder is yer, pard?"

"Do you recognize this brand, men?" and he showed the brand in india-ink upon his wrist—a red torch and blue flame, with the letters B. B.

"You is one o' us!" cried Blazes.

"I am."

"What's yer number? fer we went by numbers."

"I am your captain."

"Ther cap'n!"

The words broke from the lips of the three men together.

"Yes; I escaped, went East, donned this rig, and, coming back, am on the trail of my old band, and you are the fourth I have found, so who was the one you say that boy killed?"

"None o' our gang, cap'n, but a youth named Dickie, the Kid, as we picked up; but I are as pleased ter see yer as ef I'd struck a gold-pocket."

"You bet I is, too," said Blazes.

"So be I," chimed in Crockett.

"Well, I have found Number One, the Deserter Sergeant, and he has gone off in search of a new retreat for us, for I am back for work again, and a little revenge, too, for some one of the band betrayed us, and he is to be hunted down."

And the piercing eyes of the outlaw captain seemed to read the faces of the trio before him; but he saw no sign to show that any of them were guilty.

So he continued:

"I came off to look up some of my men and struck your trail, so followed."

"I knew you, Parson Paul, the moment I set eyes on you, so decided to take in the outfit, and did it."

"Now what have you been doing, where are you going, and what have you taken that Boy Bugler prisoner for?"

"You know me then?" asked the bugler.

"Yes."

"Where have we met?"

"It matters not, but you are Billie Blew, the Boy Bugler of Fort Fairview, so tell me what you are doing here?"

"I was discharged from the army and started home with a wagon-train; but I strayed away from the train this morning, and these men ambushed and captured me."

"They had better killed you then, for I have sworn vengeance against any man who wears a blue uniform, and you must die, boy, for I show no mercy to any one," was the stern response of the outlaw chief.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE TEST.

WHEN Buffalo Bill left the camp of his Boys in Blue a second time, it was no longer in the disguise of the Deserter Sergeant, or rather in an impersonation of the character of the dead outlaw.

He went as his own brave self, Buffalo Bill, the scout, and the trail that he took led him along the Overland which passed the cabin of Tenderfoot Tom.

That worthy was seated in front of his cabin enjoying his pipe, for he had nothing to do just then, and saw the scout coming along the trail in an easy lope.

"It are Buffalo Bill," he muttered as he recognized the scout, and a shade passed over his face.

Then he added:

"He and ther Deserter Sergeant is enough alike ter be twin brothers, and I is oneasy when I is with 'em, not bein' able ter allus tell t'other from which."

"Now ef ther sergeant happened ter be ther

scout, then I gived myself away as a present to ther hangman and no mistake.

"I is playin' a dangerous game in doublin' on myself as a honest man an' a rascal.

"But I likes ther cap'n an' I owes him my life, an' some leetle money debts too, besides his gittin' me this place, so I has ter play inter his hands.

"Then, ef he makes a fortin', I gits my share an' kin light out fer other parts.

"Ef he don't, I kin still stay here an' be honest Tenderfoot Tom; but now fer a chat with Buffalo Bill, for I guesses it are him an' not ther sergeant, though I goes slow until I knows."

At this moment the scout rode up and sung out in the cheery way natural to him:

"Ho, Tom! how are you, and what is the news?"

"I am all right, pard, an' I hain't a bit o' news."

"I am sorry, for they started me off from the fort on a trail that I expected would capture me some of the old Brimstone Brotherhood, as some of them have been seen about the Overland stations.

"You have not had any pass this way?"

"No, Bill, they has got, I guesses, since yer led ther blue-coats onto 'em."

"And no one has been here, then?"

"Only ther through coach, and I do mind now that a travelin' parson stopped here one night with me, but he hev gone to ther minester stir up ther miners thar an' rope in a leetle dust, I guesses, fer they has a eye on treasures on earth, Bill, as well as in Heaven."

"Well, I'll dodge him, for I'm not behind on sermons just now, as the fort chaplain keeps us posted on Bible trails; but I am as hungry as a wolf, Tom."

Tenderfoot Tom took the hint, and the scout was asked to dismount and soon sat down to a good supper which the station-agent prepared, for he certainly was a skilled cook.

After a couple of hours' rest Buffalo Bill mounted his horse, and, greatly to the relief of Tenderfoot Tom, rode on his way, the latter remarking:

"Yas, it are Buffalo Bill; but durn me ef he hain't a photograph o' ther Deserter Sergeant, and some day thar will be trouble about them two lookin' so much alike.

"I are real glad he hev gone."

And the scout laughed to himself as he rode away and mused:

"You are a great villain, Tenderfoot Tom, and the double game you are playing is putting a noose about your neck.

"I gave you a fright, that is certain, by appearing as Buffalo Bill, and now I'll test my resemblance to the Deserter Sergeant by going back within the hour.

"If you think you have recognized the cheat, it won't be wise for you to say so."

He rode on for a couple of miles, and turned into a canyon with a rocky bed and where the hoofs of his horse left no trace.

Up this he went for a mile and halted in a thicket, where a large spring was visible.

Here, staked out to feed, was a horse, the same which the scout had ridden when he made his visit to Tenderfoot Tom in the part of the Deserter Sergeant.

He dismounted, and, taking from a limb a saddle and bridle, soon had the animal ready for the road, while the horse he had ridden there was stripped of his trappings and staked out to feed, as the other had been.

A change of apparel was then made, and other changes which caused the scout to look slightly different in face and form.

As though satisfied with what metamorphosis he had made, he mounted and rode down the canyon, and in little over an hour since leaving Tenderfoot Tom's cabin, appeared on the trail leading to it.

Tenderfoot Tom spied him, and he muttered:

"Now thar are ther sergeant, and durn him, fer ef ther scout comes back while he are here, thar will be a row an' I'll git inter trouble. I'll jist tell him thar Buffalo Bill an' a gang o' Boys in Blue are a prowlin' around on his trail, and he'll light out—no, I guesses not, for he hain't no fool an' will jist set me down for a liar, fer he kin see thar hain't no big trail visible ter make my story true.

"I'll tell him Buffalo Bill were here and said as how he hed a comp'ny o' scouts and sogers not far away."

Soon after the scout rode up and dismounted, while he said:

"Hello, Tom, what news, and whose trail is this coming and going to and from your cabin?"

"Buffalo Bill's."

"The deuce! Is he around?"

"He are very much around, sergeant, and he hev got a number o' sogers and Buckskin Boys with him, he said."

"They didn't come here?"

"No, he come alone; but he didn't stay long, and went back to jine 'em, and you was ther party they was lookin' fer."

"No!"

"So Bill told me."

"Well, I found a good retreat for the Brim-

stones. It is in Eagle Canyon, which you know doubtless."

"I does know it, and it are a daisy place ter stand off an army; but ef you gits 'em too strong fer yer, it are a rat-trap, sergeant."

"There is a way of retreat from there, Tom, which you don't know about; but has the chief returned?"

"No."

"And he has sent no men yet?"

"Nary."

"Well, I'll return to Eagle Canyon, and you can direct the men there, for I'll be lying in hiding and see them."

"Now I'll be off, for I don't care to run upon Buffalo Bill, you know."

"You bet! but thar comes ther chief, sergeant," and Tenderfoot Tom pointed down the trail to where the Man in Black just then came into view, riding at a canter toward the cabin.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A CHANGE OF COMMANDERS.

IN response to the invitation of General Carr, to attend the reception given at his quarters, the new commander of the fort, Captain Fred Forrester, presented himself in full uniform.

He was the last one to arrive, which at once caused among those who were determined to criticise him, the unkind comment that it would have been better for him to have come early and depart, thus attracting as little attention to himself as possible.

But Fred Forrester, elegant in manners, courteous and handsome as an Adonis, could not but attract attention upon his entrance.

He made his way at once to where General Carr stood, with Colonel Cassidy by his side, and Mrs. Denton, who had been invited to preside.

Kate Kennerley was not visible, but Major Denton was not far away, and at once every eye was upon the officer who had been made a social outcast.

His face was calm, had grown stern of late, and he glanced coolly about him, meeting eyes that fell beneath his own gaze, and at such times the glimmer of a sneer was upon his handsome mouth.

Never had he looked better, all admitted, and from the dashing, devil-l-care young lieutenant of a few months before, wild as a boy, reckless in gambling as in all else, yet always the daring, splendid soldier, he had become like a man of fifty in mien, and one whose icy reserve could not be broken through.

He bowed low before General Carr, and took his offered hand, while the general said:

"Colonel Cassidy, I take pleasure in presenting to you Captain Fred Forrester, of the 4th Cavalry, and I may say no better officer can be found in the service."

Fred Forrester bowed and said, firmly:

"I thank you, General Carr, for your kind words."

Then he turned to his new commander.

There was no embarrassment in his manner, and he met the eye of Colonel Cassidy fearlessly.

He saw a soldierly-looking man, of some forty-five years of age, and one who he knew had made a gallant record, and whose life had a spice of romance in it, for he had loved a maiden who was pledged to become his wife, but she had died of heart disease upon the very day appointed for the wedding, and the colonel had never loved another.

Colonel Cassidy gazed upon the tall, superb form before him, and recognized in Fred Forrester the perfect soldier.

He then met his eyes and saw the unflinching look, and read the noble, handsome face.

He extended his hand, and said warmly:

"I am glad to meet one so strongly recommended by General Carr, and whose fame as a true soldier has often reached me.

"We will be friends, Captain Forrester."

The foes of Fred Forrester felt taken aback by this warm reception by the new commander of a man who was under a cloud.

It proved that Colonel Cassidy was either ignorant that the young officer was a social outcast, or he ignored wholly all the scandals against him.

"From Colonel Cassidy Fred Forrester turned to Mrs. Denton, who had a smiling welcome for him, and said:

"Captain Forrester, Kate has been urgently requested to sing to-night, and came off without her music, and no one can get it but herself, so will you look her up and escort her home after her music?"

It was upon the lips of Fred Forrester to refuse, for he had determined to at once leave after having paid his respects to his host and the guest of the evening; but Mrs. Denton seemed to see as much in his face, and said quickly:

"You will do this for me, Captain Forrester—Kate is with Lieutenant Blackford."

"I will do as you ask, Mrs. Denton," and the officer turned and strode away in search of Kate Kennerley.

If he knew that every eye was upon him, if he heard the whispers about him, if he saw the averted faces, he did not show by an expression that he did so.

Here and there some one bowed coldly to him, and the surprise was a frigid return of the compliment.

To a superior he unbent a little, and yet never to an equal in rank, while he acknowledged the salute of an inferior as it was intended, or recognition of his rank, that was all.

At last he spied Kate Kennerley.

Lieutenant Burke Blackford was her escort, but she was conversing with Surgeon Frank Powell.

In General Carr, Colonel Cassidy, Major Denton and his beautiful wife, Kate Kennerley and Surgeon Powell, the social outcast could count those friendly to him in all that vast assembly.

To all others he was as it were a stranger, and he made them feel that he was willing that it should be so.

As he approached, Kate Kennerley glanced up, smiled, and offered her hand, while Surgeon Powell said warmly:

"I am delighted that you came, Forrester."

"Thank you, Powell," and Forrester's stern manner unbent, while Kate Kennerley remarked:

"It is a pleasure I had not anticipated, seeing you here this evening, Captain Forrester."

"Duty alone brought me, Miss Kennerley; but I thank you for saying it is a pleasure to see me here."

Burke Blackford's face clouded.

He was over head and ears in love with Kate Kennerley and usurped her society as it were, for he seemed to claim her at all times.

He disliked Forrester intensely, and on several occasions they had had a sharp passage of words together, with the captain having the best of it.

When Blackford and his company had gotten into a tight place on one occasion, Fred Forrester had gone to the rescue, and more, he had not claimed the honor of his gallant rescue of the officer who was known to be his enemy.

Lieutenant Blackford had frankly acknowledged the favor, but it had caused him to dislike him the more on account of the obligation, and then too he feared him as a rival for the regard of Kate Kennerley.

He had bowed to his superior, but had felt anger at the man for coming up and being welcomed by Miss Kennerley.

"I have a message for you, Miss Kennerley," said Fred Forrester.

"Indeed, and what may it be, Captain Forrester?"

"Mrs. Denton says that you neglected to send your music to-night, and that you alone can get it, so I was requested to escort you home after it."

The face of Burke Blackford flushed hotly, and he replied with anger in his tone:

"Miss Kennerley is at present in my company, sir, and I will act as her escort."

"If Miss Kennerley prefers, certainly," was the calm response of Fred Forrester.

"Miss Kennerley prefers to do just as Mrs. Denton, her *chaperon*, desires to have her do."

"I did not send the music, for I cared not to sing or play, but as the general requested it, I will go and get my music, so, Captain Forrester, pray give me your arm, and I know Surgeon Powell and Lieutenant Blackford will excuse me."

The former bowed a pleasant acquiescence, but the latter said, almost rudely:

"I have a claim for a dance, you know, so will expect you back at once."

"Pardon me, but I shall take my time," and the beauty's face flushed and she gave an angry toss of her head as she walked off with Fred Forrester.

It was not far to the Denton mansion, and yet not a word was spoken on the way thither.

The lamp burned dimly in the parlor, but Fred Forrester turned it up brightly, while Kate Kennerley searched for her music on the stand.

"Captain Forrester."

"Yes, Miss Kennerley."

"Why do you not leave Fort Fairview?"

"Why should I?"

"You could get ordered elsewhere."

"I do not care to go."

"I am sorry, for it must be very unpleasant for you here."

"Miss Kennerley, I shall not leave this fort, and those who are my foes will one day feel that I have avenged every slight, every slur and unkind word put upon me."

"Have you your music, may I ask?"

"Yes, it is here."

He took it, turned down the lamp and followed her to the door and in silence returned to headquarters.

As they passed along the quick eye of Fred Forrester caught sight of a muffled form behind a tree, but he said nothing.

He escorted her to Mrs. Denton's presence, bowed, bade General Carr good-evening, and departed.

As he descended the steps he met Burke Blackford ascending, and cool, cutting and sneering came the words:

"Your spying act to-night, Blackford, was that of a blackguard."

And he passed on, leaving Lieutenant Black-

ford white-faced and trembling upon the steps, for he knew that Fred Forrester had seen and recognized him behind the tree as he passed, for he was not three feet away from him.

CHAPTER XXIX.

SEEN FROM AN AMBUSH.

BUFFALO BILL, having passed muster in his own character and the impersonation of the Deserter Sergeant before Tenderfoot Tom, felt less dread of being found out in the daring double game he was playing, and so he met the Chief of the Brimstone Brotherhood without any seeming fear of the result.

The chief rode up to Tenderfoot Tom's cabin dressed as before in his disguise as an itinerant parson, and he seemed glad to find the scout there.

"Hello, sergeant! have you found a retreat?" he asked, hastily.

"Yes, sir; in the Eagle Canyon, which Tom knows well, and which can be held by a small force against a large one."

"How far from here?"

"About twenty miles, chief, and I can guide you there, as I suppose I must return to meet your men?"

"No; I have other work for you—just what I had you do before: so I will find the way to the canyon and take some men there I have awaiting me back on the trail."

"You found some of the old Brotherhood, then?"

"Yes; three of them, and a prisoner, who will also join."

"Did the three have the Brimstone Brand on them, sir?"

"Oh, yes; I was careful to see about that."

"And the other?"

"Oh, he's a youngster, but will be valuable, I guess."

"I left them hiding on the trail, while I came on here to see if you had found a retreat."

"Yes, sir; but what is it you wish me to do?"

"Do you know aught about Snow Face, the Renegade?"

"Only that he has moved his village, sir."

"You know where it is?"

"I know about the locality."

"Well, I have determined to have you go to him and say that I am once more in the field for gold."

"Tell him where I shall have my retreat and that I hope he will still be my ally and be ready to aid me with a band of warriors should I be pressed to retreat into his country by the soldiers."

"You understand?"

"Perfectly, chief."

"Say that I will arm his braves with firearms as rapidly as I can, and send blankets and booty to his people, while he shall be generously remembered with gold."

"I understand, sir; you wish to feel that, as before, he is your ally, and even offer him more generous terms."

"That is it, and you must offer him anything so we win him over, whatever we may pay him."

"Yes, sir."

"And, sergeant?"

"Yes, chief."

"There is one thing I wish to find out."

"Yes, sir."

"Did you ever hear that there was a woman in the village of Snow Face?"

"He has hundreds of squaws there."

"I do not mean Indian women, but a white woman, a captive maiden, in fact."

"Is there such a person there, sir?"

"I do not know; but I heard a rumor that a white woman, and a beautiful one, too, had been seen in the Indian village."

"Then she must be a captive, sir."

"Perhaps, and perhaps not."

"Did you see such a person there when you visited Snow Face for me before?"

"If he had a white captive, chief, he naturally would not wish me to see her," was the evasive reply of the scout, and yet the outlaw leader, shrewd as he was, saw no eluding of his question in the response.

"Well, I want you to find out if such is the case, if you have to make some excuse to remain a week in the village to do so."

"Yes, sir."

"And I hope you will go at once, for I am more anxious, from reasons I cannot explain, to discover about this white girl in Snow Face's camp, even than to get him for my ally; but I do not of course wish to have him suspect this."

"Now I will find out from Tenderfoot Tom just where the Eagle Canyon is, and return for my men and take them there."

"When will you go?"

"At once, chief," and soon after the pretended Deserter mounted his horse and rode away.

But he did not go in haste, after dropping the cabin out of sight, nor did he direct his way toward the mountains where the Sioux under their white renegade chief were supposed to have their stronghold.

He made his way to a position that commanded the trail which he knew Captain Brimstone must take, to reach Eagle Canyon, the retreat which he had selected for the outlaws, and

selected with a view to his own intentions in the future.

Leaving his horse in a thicket, he made his way on foot to a rocky point around which the trail to Eagle Canyon wound.

Here he crept to a secure hiding place among the rocks, and, with a bush which he cut with his bowie, arranged a perfect shield in a position which would bring those passing along the trail within ten feet of him.

Spreading his blanket, he lay down to rest, and with the perfect patience that an Indian exhibits.

Two hours passed away and he did not move.

He had sunk to sleep, for he knew that he could be depended upon to wake up at the slightest sound, even in fact at the high presence of a human being, for he had trained himself so well that it was a matter of instinct with him almost as much as it was with a dumb brute.

Suddenly a sharp click was heard, as an iron-shod hoof struck a rock, and in an instant the scout was awake and crouching, all attention, at his post of observation.

He heard now the fall of hoofs, and soon after there appeared in sight the forms of five horsemen, having in lead several pack-animals.

There were two in advance, riding side by side, one the disguised outlaw chief, the other a mere youth.

"The Boy Bugler, as I live!" broke in a hoarse whisper from the lips of the scout.

"A prisoner," he added, to immediately after rejoin:

"No, he is no prisoner, for he is not bound, and he is talking pleasantly with Brimstone."

They were now abreast of the scout's position, and he saw that the bugler had his weapons, so could not be a prisoner, and he recognized the pack-animal belonging to Billie Blew trotting along behind him.

Behind these two came Parson Paul, Crockett and Blazes, with the pack-animals following them.

"That is the youngster he spoke of as being one who would be useful," muttered the scout, and he had just uttered the words when the bugler said in a voice which Buffalo Bill distinctly heard:

"You say that this Deserter Sergeant is named Benson?"

"Yes; Brick Benson the soldiers called him before he deserted, but he enlisted as Robert Benson."

"Ah! I had heard that he was dead."

"Indeed! who from?" asked the chief.

"Captain Fred Forrester told me that the Deserter Sergeant had been killed by Buffalo Bill, and—"

The scout heard no more, as they passed on; but he had heard enough to cause him to mutter:

"I must go slow, for there must be no mistake made."

"But what is the mystery about this Boy Bugler?"

"It is another riddle for me to cipher out, and I guess I have my hands full."

"Now to go and get my other horse, leave him with my Boys in Blue, and then hol for the camp of Snow Face, the Renegade."

"I have plenty to do, and it must be done this time without a hitch."

So saying to himself, Buffalo Bill retraced his way to his horse, rode to the hiding-place where his second animal was, for to play both the deserter and the scout he dared not ride the same animal, and then he set off for the retreat of his Boys in Blue, who patiently awaited in hiding the coming of the man in whom they had such perfect confidence.

CHAPTER XXX.

IN EAGLE CANYON.

AFTER the scout had departed from the cabin of Tenderfoot Tom, the chief stood watching him for some little time, and then said:

"Tom, we must kill Buffalo Bill, or his resemblance to that man will get us into trouble."

"Yes, cap'n, and Buffler Bill hain't far away from here, nuther."

"What do you mean?" quickly asked the outlaw leader.

"He were here ter-day."

"The scout?"

"Thet same."

"He has been here, you say?"

"I said so," and then Tom went on to tell of the visit of Buffalo Bill, his departure, and then the return of the supposed Deserter Sergeant.

"And he said he was looking for me and my men?"

"Yas, and he hinted that there were soldiers a-backin' him."

"Then I must be more cautious, and also leave, for I have men in the valley it will not do to have the scout or the soldiers run upon."

"Did the last coach bring the things I ordered?"

"Yas, cap'n, and they came through as feed fer me, and are strapped onto a pack-saddle now."

"And you can let me have a horse?"

"Sartin, and maybe you had better light out in some hurry."

"I'll do it," was the ready answer, and soon after, mounted upon his own horse, and leading a pack-animal loaned him by Tenderfoot Tom, Captain Brimstone went on the trail to find his party, whom he had left several miles away in the valley to await his return.

He found them where he had left them, the three outlaws and the bugler, and soon after they were on the trail to Eagle Canyon.

He carried a map rudely drawn in his hand, which Tenderfoot Tom had made him, and entering a stream at a buffalo ford, the tracks of his horses soon were lost among the innumerable other trails that crossed there.

Turning up the stream, as the map directed, he soon came to a shelving shore of rock, when he went out upon dry land, the hoofs of his horses leaving no tracks whatever.

Here he continued on according to directions and discovered that the hard nature of the ground left no trace, and the wisdom in the Deserter Sergeant seeking a retreat which it would be difficult to track one to, struck him forcibly.

As he wound around the point of rocks, he and the others little dreamed that the scout was near enough to have thrown his hat into their faces.

The conversation had turned upon the Deserter Sergeant, and thus it was that the scout had heard what he did, as they passed his place of hiding in the rocks.

Following the trail according to the map, the outlaw leader went on until he began to ascend a steep, rocky and narrow path, down which a stream swiftly made its way.

The path narrowed into a chasm, and the stream became some two feet deep and ran more swiftly, rendering the advance of the horsemen very slow.

After passing through a rocky and natural gateway, rising in terraces, the leader halted and said:

"This spot is well chosen indeed, for this gateway of rock can serve as a barrier for half a hundred men, and they could beat back a regiment."

He spoke to the bugler, who quickly returned:

"It is a safe retreat, if there is a means of escape from the canyon."

"By Jupiter, but you have a long head on your young shoulders—we must see to that."

They were soon encamped on the canyon, which was certainly a splendid retreat for just such men as those who expected to make it their stronghold.

The sides were cliff-like and impassable, the summits too wild and rugged to allow of a human being making his way along them, while there was plenty of grass for the cattle, the clearest of water, and fine camping-places under the shelter of pine and other trees.

Up the canyon was a large cavern, which Captain Brimstone remembered that Tenderfoot Tom said afforded a means of retreat, so he did not trouble himself more on that score, but set to work to make himself as comfortable as possible.

At last he sat down in front of his wicky-up and said to the bugler, who had pitched his little tent in a secluded spot up the canyon:

"You have made yourself comfortable, bugler."

"I generally do, for life is too short to live uncomfortably if you can enjoy comforts."

"Well, sit down and let us have our talk out, for you were to tell me a secret, if I allowed you to keep your traps."

"Yes, and my life, for your men would have killed me, I think," and the bugler shuddered.

"Doubtless, for they are a bad lot; but how is it I find you away from the fort?"

"Then you have been at the fort?"

The face of the outlaw flushed at this, but he said:

"Oh, yes, in disguise; but you were bugler of Denton's regiment?"

"Yes."

"And I find you on the prairies with a pack-horse, well-mounted and armed."

"Did you desert?"

"No, for I have my discharge in my pocket, and had started East, but changed my mind."

"Why?"

"For revenge," and the last word was savagely uttered.

"Ah! some one has wronged you?"

"Well, yes, or I will call it so; but at any rate, I am of a revengeful nature, and told you I would join your band."

"To get revenge?"

"Yes."

"On whom?"

"I wish to capture Captain Fred Forrester."

"Ah! he is your enemy?"

"Yes, and by kidnapping Miss Kate Kenncreley you can get a large sum as ransom."

"Can you arrange this?"

"I can plot and carry it out, and if you kidnap her my pay will be to have you capture Fred Forrester and place him in my power."

"All right."

"Of course I am to share in your money successes, for I will be your spy and help you."

"Agreed; but you will be known by the soldiers."

"No, for I shall dress as a woman."
 "The very thing, for you are as handsome as one, and I'll make you my lieutenant."
 "It is a bargain," was the cool reply, and the look upon the face of the disguised woman was wicked in the extreme.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE MESSENGER.

BUFFALO BILL, with his led horse, rode rapidly toward the canyon where his Boys in Blue lay in wait for him.

He found the sentinel on duty on the alert, and the corporal had returned from the fort with the general's letter.

The latter told of the arrival of Colonel Cassidy, and after touching upon other matters, went on as follows:

"Now, Cody, I feel tempted to reprimand you for having again impersonated the Deserter Sergeant, for it must leak out that he is dead, and then your life will be at our forfeit."

"You are reckless in the extreme, and the chances you take are desperate."

"I hope you will hasten matters, and end the suspense regarding the risk you run, and I have faith, if nothing happens to you personally, that you will carry out your plot to a perfect success."

"Corporal Carter says that you have your Boys in Blue within call, and they will prove faithful to the end, and as true as steel when called on, and it is better that they should be within easy call when you need them, as to ride to the fort to get a force might destroy all."

"Colonel Cassidy will be your friend, as I have confided to him your mission in part, and will have him in possession of all the facts when I give over the command to him next week."

"I believe he will also be Captain Forrester's friend, and that reminds me to tell you that Forrester went after the train and had an interview with the Boy Bugler."

"His acts are mysterious, especially so under the cloud that is upon him, but I will not lose faith in him, and I only hope you may make discoveries to bear out all that he has said in refutation of charges against him."

Buffalo Bill read the general's letter carefully, and then sent for the sergeant, and the two had a long talk together, after which the scout said:

"It is dull work for you here, sergeant, but remember you are on outpost duty, and must be ready to be called upon at an instant's notice and for the deadliest duty."

"I am going on a perilous mission now that will take me days, but upon it much depends, and the end will justify the risks I run."

"Should I not return in two weeks from today, then do you go back to the fort and report to Colonel Cassidy that I am a prisoner to Snow Face, the Renegade, or have been killed by him, for it is to his camp that I go."

"Before doing so, however, go to the Overland station which is under the charge of Tenderfoot Tom, and tell him that you have a message from the Deserter Sergeant for Captain Brimstone, and have him direct you to Eagle Canyon."

"Go to the latter place with your men and capture the outlaws there, and this will be a feather in your cap when you return to the fort."

"But wait for me two weeks, for if I am not back in that time I will either be dead or a prisoner; if alive, I hope to get back sooner."

"My reason for going to see the renegade chief is in behalf of Captain Brimstone, and my desire is to lead both into a trap, so as to rid the border of the white chief and the Brimstone Brotherhood at the same time."

"Do you understand, sergeant, how much I depend upon my Boys in Blue for the work before me?"

"I do, sir, and you will find us ready and willing at your call."

"I know that; but now I must get what rest I can, and then make up as the Deserter Sergeant, for in that character I go to visit Snow Face."

"You take desperate chances, sir."

"Well, the end justifies them."

And a few hours after, refreshed by his rest, mounted upon a fine horse and armed to the teeth, Buffalo Bill rode out of the secret retreat of his Boys in Blue and took a trail leading to the mountains to the north.

No man knew the country better than he, and avoiding all trails where he might meet a scouting party of soldiers, red-skins on a raid, or prowling bands of outlaws, he made his way at a steady pace toward the land of the Sioux.

The scout could not but recall his former visit to Snow Face, the Renegade.

He had gone there as the envoy of Captain Brimstone, who held some secret claim upon the white chief for a service rendered in the past, and felt a right to call upon him.

What that claim was the scout did not know; but he had discovered that Snow Face was willing to pay the debt, whatever it might be, while, for some reason, he stood in horror of the outlaw coming to visit him.

He had seen a desire on the part of Snow Face to get rid of him, Buffalo Bill, and send in his place an Indian messenger back to Captain Brimstone reporting the death of his envoy by an accident.

Buffalo Bill understood that this desire to kill

him was on account of a secret discovery he had made, to the effect that Snow Face was not alone in his mountain retreat among the Sioux, but had a white captive with him in the person of a very beautiful woman, one who seemed to be a very willing captive, however.

To save his life Buffalo Bill had pledged his word not to betray the presence of the lovely woman in the Sioux village; but this pledge, though pretending to accept it, Snow Face had no faith in, and so had sent a chief and warrior to waylay and kill him.

Suspecting treachery, the scout had so well prepared against it that the next morning two dead Indians were found on the trail, and a note addressed to Snow Face told him that he had simply turned the tables upon his red-skins.

And, with all this, the scout was once more a messenger from Captain Brimstone to Snow Face, the Renegade Chief of the Sioux.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE RED-SKIN SENTINELS.

IN the recesses of a range of mountains, some three days' slow march from Fort Fairview, there dwelt a formidable tribe of Sioux Indians.

They had given more trouble to the soldiers and settlers along the border than all the other tribes together, and their old chief, Red Tomahawk, was noted as a relentless and merciless foe to the pale-faces.

Then there came a rumor that Red Tomahawk had become the mighty medicine-man of his people, and had given to a white man the full power of war-chief.

If any one doubted this, it soon became an acknowledged fact, when a band of several hundred warriors swept along the border settlements and mining-camps, and even flaunted their feather head-dress in front of the armed posts, and a white man was seen to be the chief of the red marauders.

He led his red-men well, handled them with the skill of a trained soldier, and proved himself as cruel as the greatest fiend in the band.

His name of Snow Face was not long in becoming known and feared, and in several affairs with the soldiers he had worsted them.

The stronghold of this white renegade was known to be in the mountains and impregnable, and yet, after a repulse led by Captain Forrester, Snow Face had deserted his retreat and moved his village to another point still further in the mountains.

Just why he had done so no one seemed to understand, and there were not soldiers enough on the border to attack him successfully in his stronghold; but move he had, and he selected a retreat some three-score miles further into the mountains, and which could not be surprised by the best scouts of the plains.

It was by narrow and rugged trails the stronghold was reached, and the outpost furthest from the Indian village was fully twenty miles from the quarters of Snow Face, the renegade.

This outpost of sentinels consisted of a dozen Indians, one of whom was kept constantly on watch, his station being a high perch of rocks on the mountain side.

He could see for miles out upon the plains, in every direction except behind him where the village lay, and he reached his place of observation by climbing up the steep side of the ridge.

In the valley several hundred feet below were his comrades, encamped in snug quarters made of brush and saplings, and their ponies were staked out not far distant.

Each day at dawn a warrior sentinel would climb to his lookout and remain on duty until nightfall, when it would be no longer necessary, for no enemy however strong in force would attempt to come over the "Bad Lands" at dark, for the chances of going to certain death were ten to one against him, so dangerous was the approach.

If a foe was seen in the daytime the lookout hailed his comrades below, and if danger was feared, half a dozen of them mounted in hot haste and started by as many different trails to the various villages back in the mountains, while the remainder would stay to note the movements and force of the coming enemy, and one would go to each new discovery to the chief and report.

Thus, before a foe could reach the mountains, the warriors from half a dozen different villages scattered about the mountains could assemble upon their own selected battle-ground to beat back an enemy.

To approach the villages by any other route would take weeks and need a very large force. I have been thus particular in describing the advance to the Sioux stronghold, to show that the white chief who ruled the red-skins was no ordinary man, and meant not to be surprised and beaten in his own camp.

One day the sentinel on duty on the perch of rocks hailed the valley below, and the dozen red-skins there were at once on the alert.

White men could never have borne the days and nights of utter idleness that those red-men so patiently put up with; but then the nature of the red-man is one of the most uncomplaining

and patient resignation to his lot, be it what it may.

The hail of the lookout did not create an alarm, for he only gave a signal that some one was in sight.

His second signal was to the effect that only one horseman was in sight, and soon after came word from the sentinel on the rocks that the one in sight was on his way toward the mountains, was following a trail and picking his way with care through the Bad Lands which lay between the plains and the foot-hills where the outpost was located.

Then a call from the sentinel sent his comrades clambering up the steep ridge to his side.

They discerned the stranger hardly half a mile distant, alone, and knew that he was a pale-face.

He was well mounted on an American horse, and ever and anon raised his hands to his eyes, came to a halt and surveyed the foot-hills before him.

Approaching nearer, he halted and raised a lance from its swing on his saddle, and it could be seen that the head of the lance had a number of red and white streamers floating from it.

The red-skins glanced at each other, and one said in his native tongue:

"Pale-face brave with talking paper* for chief."

The lance with its red and white streamers had been a sign to the red-skins that told them that the one they beheld came not as an enemy, for he bore the colors, as it were, of their white chief, Snow Face, and they had his commands, after the first messenger from Captain Brimstone, to respect the bearer.

So, while the sentinel remained at his post, the others descended to the canyon, and when the horseman rode into it, he came face to face with the dozen red-skin horsemen awaiting his coming.

They sat upon their ponies, ranging across the canyon, and as silent as statues in bronze.

But the horseman did not hesitate an instant, and, raising his lance over his head, rode straight toward them, though a keen eye could see that his rifle hung ready for use, his revolvers were cocked in their holsters, and he was ready to open fire and wheel to the right about like a flash if it came to a fight between him and the dozen braves he dared so fearlessly.

The horseman was Buffalo Bill, the pretended Deserter Sergeant, and the messenger of Captain Brimstone to Snow Face, the Renegade Chief of the Sioux.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

A MYSTERIOUS PAIR.

RED TOMAHAWK, the mighty medicine-man of the Sioux, was a good ruler of his people, and not only was he loved by all, but he was also greatly dreaded.

His word was law, and his will supreme.

But Red Tomahawk was growing old, and on his last war-trail he had nearly lost his life, and but for a brave rescue by a man and a woman he would have been hanged by a band of his deadly white foes.

They, Red Tomahawk and his rescuers, had drifted about, neither expecting to meet again; but only a short while after they had met, and the Indian chief had saved his two rescuers from his own braves.

The secret was a strange one, for a man of superb physique, a splendid specimen of manhood, courtly, brainy, reared in the upper class of life, and a woman, young, beautiful, fascinating, had gone with the Red Tomahawk to make their home among his people.

They had gone to the wilds of the mountains, to herd, as it were, with red-skins, though the two would have been ornaments to metropolitan society.

In the man the Red Tomahawk had found a strong ally, one whom he could depend upon, brave as a lion, a wondrous athlete, dead shot and perfect rider, and his wisdom was great.

He had told his people how the two pale-faces had saved the Sioux an everlasting disgrace by saving him, their greatest chief, from being hanged like a dog, and thus shutting him out from the Happy Hunting-Grounds of his people forever, making him the mighty ruler of a dozen tribes, like unto a squaw.

He told of the courage of the woman, and that the two had become as his children.

Then he said that he was too old to take the trail, but would counsel his people, and that the Snow Face would lead his warriors.

If there were braves who would have urged against this, they were silenced by the first expedition the white chief led them upon.

They saw that he was a general, handled his force to perfection, hit his foes hard, and secured booty and scalps for them.

And so, while the old Red Tomahawk took up his abode as head chief, or mighty medicine-man, in the medicine-lodge, the Snow Face, Cruel Eye and Cruel Face, as he was variously

* A letter is called a talking paper by Indians.—THE AUTHOR.

called, became the war-chief of the half-dozen villages that comprised the tribe over which he held sway.

In the new stronghold of the tribe, among the mountains, Snow Face made his home more comfortable than ever.

He had a fine log cabin, and it was furnished strangely well for a frontier home; but then many a settler's comfortable cabin had contributed to its furnishing.

The cabin had four rooms in it, was situated under an overhanging cliff clad with pines, which kept off the cold north breezes.

Before its door swept a deep and swift-flowing stream, and a piazza ran across the front from which a view up and down the valley could be obtained.

Several of the villages were in sight from the piazza, though they were miles apart, and the valley, and several others formed the tribe of Sioux.

They were rich in cattle and plunder, and could turn out over a thousand mounted warriors, while a large home guard could be left to defend their villages.

Within an hour's time from the giving of an alarm, the villages could throw their fighting force at any point of attack, and if beaten back as many more of the old men and boys could support them.

A glance at the two persons on the piazza of the cabin, which the red-skins would call the "Log Teepee" of their war-chief, revealed a man and woman whom the reader has before seen.

The reader beheld them at an Overland stage station one day when the woman, backed by the man, saved Red Tomahawk from being hanged by the miners who had him prisoner, and again they saw them when they stood by the dead body of their guide, at bay, ready to die rather than become prisoners, and when, in the very nick of time, they were saved by the very chief whom they had saved from death.

Some strange motive had impelled these two to come to the Western wilds, and a stranger motive still had made them cast their lot with the red-skins, become renegades and war against their own people.

And these two were upon the piazza of their home, the man idly lolling in a hammock and smoking a pipe, while he watched the smoke curl upward with seeming interest, as though castle-building.

The woman was dressed in buckskin, beaded and quilted, and her head was shaded by a sombrero that was very becoming.

She carried a "quirt" in her hand, and wore gloves, Indian-tanned, and was ready for a ride.

"You won't go for a gallop, chief?" she asked. "No, I am too lazy," was the drawing response, and with a wave of her hand she went down the steps, and leaped upon the back of a horse with a mane and tail that was very long and beautiful, for they were like milk.

The animal set off at a gallop, plunged into the stream and went down the valley in a long canter that caused the miles to drop rapidly behind him.

This was kept up until in entering a canyon the beautiful rider drew rein suddenly, for before her and coming toward her were five horsemen.

Three men in advance, riding abreast, with a white man in the center, and two more brought up the rear.

The other four were red-skins.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

A STRANGE COMPACT.

THE party approaching through the canyon drew rein as they approached the beautiful horsewoman, and the white man, who appeared to be a prisoner, and yet was not bound, said politely as he raised his cavalry hat, with its dark plume, for the Deserter Sergeant had never relinquished his uniform, and the scout had impersonated him in dress as well as character.

"We meet again, fair queen of the Sioux." "Ah! you are he who visited us before, as a messenger from the captain of the Brimstone Brotherhood?" replied the woman.

"Yes."

"You are the Deserter Sergeant?"

"So men call me."

"It was a disastrous affair when Chief Snow Face went last to support the Brimstones?"

"Yes, unfortunate for the Brotherhood and the Sioux."

"Some one was traitor, I suppose?"

"Or Buffalo Bill was on the trail and thwarted the plans of the Brotherhood and their allies."

"Whatever was the cause the result was disastrous, and we came away here to seek a home."

"I have come here to again see your chief."

"It is dangerous."

"Why so?"

"You have not surely forgotten your visit to one other stronghold?"

"Oh, no, nor his treachery."

"Hail you dare say this to me?" and the woman's face flushed and her eyes flashed with anger.

"Will you give me another word, then, for his act in seeking to have me killed on my way back to my chief?" was the cool query.

"Come, we must not quarrel, for you have come here on a mission."

"Yes."

"And Edmund Allyn?"

"I beg pardon."

"I mean your captain, Brimstone—what of him?" and the woman spoke in an embarrassed way.

"Ah yes; he escaped, as you see I did, and he is once more at the head of the Brotherhood, so seeks aid of your—"

The scout paused and looked her full in the face, as though waiting for her to fill out the sentence.

She did it with most perfect coolness:

"My husband, you would say, Douglass Dean."

Her face flushed and then paled, for she had uttered a name she had not intended to speak.

But a glance at the face of the pretended Deserter Sergeant showed that he had not heard her, or at least showed no sign of having done so.

But she was mistaken, for he repeated the name mentally over and over again until it was indelibly stamped in his mind.

But he said quietly:

"Yes, I came to see your husband, Chief Snow Face, in spite of his bad treatment of me when last we met."

"Is he here?"

"At his quarters, yes."

"Are they far away?"

"Some miles; but how did you reach here?"

"Trained."

"And you found my young braves on the watch?"

"Oh yes, they saw me before I did them, and one of them recognized me from having seen me on my last visit to the chief, while my lance with its colors, you know, proved a passport, and they were on their way to Snow Face with me when you met us."

"I will conduct you to him," and turning to the red-skins she gave them an order to retrace their way, which they promptly did.

Then she said:

"Now, Sir Sergeant, I will be your escort."

He rode to her side, and the two went on their way along the trail, neither speaking for some time, when the woman said:

"You are a brave man, sergeant."

"Thank you; but why do you say so?" carelessly.

"Because you a second time enter the lions' den, after an experience that would deter most men from doing so again."

"What danger have I to fear this time?"

"My husband is a man who hates to be thwarted, and he failed to have you put out of the way once."

"So may try again?"

"I did not say so; but if he does, take my word for it no harm shall befall you, that is, if you will agree to certain terms I wish to make with you."

"Well, madam?"

"I do not wish your captain to meet Chief Snow Face."

"With interests in common and the bond of mutual protection, I cannot see how it can be avoided."

"Well, I do not wish him to come here."

"You mean Captain Brimstone must not come here?"

"Yes."

"I believe I can arrange that for you."

"Do so, and no harm shall befall you here, though I am sure that Chief Snow Face means you harm!"

"Ah!"

"He will never let you go from here, though he may not kill you."

"He will hold you as a prisoner, for he will not trust you not to tell your captain of my presence here."

"I did not tell him so."

"I believe you; but he will take no second risk."

"How will he account to my captain?"

"By telling him that you met your death by accident, and sending one of his Indian warriors to your chief with his acceptance of his wishes."

"I see; but I will be held as a prisoner?"

"Yes, but I will release you, if not immediately, as soon as I can, and you can escape thus, as I will show you the way; but remember, you are not to speak of me under any circumstances."

"I understand."

"Then come on with me to the chief's quarters."

They rode on together for awhile in silence, and then the scout asked:

"May I ask you a question?"

"Certainly."

"Why is it that you, a brilliant, beautiful, splendid woman, can be content to dwell here among red skins, the wife of a renegade white man, and he, too, one who appears like a man among men, who could win honor in the world?"

"The question is a strange one, coming as it

does from you, sergeant, who, a superb specimen of manhood yourself, and one who could have won his way to rank and fame, was willing to become a murderer, a deserter and trail robber."

She spoke with a scorn in her voice that could not be disguised, and the scout flinched, for in asking the question he had momentarily forgotten that he was not the villain he represented himself to be.

"With a man it is different," he said, in an embarrassed way.

"No, it is not different, for a woman has followed where love led her, and my idol is not shattered as I have found him to be."

"He was driven, though innocent, to hide from the gallows, and it made his heart turn to gall, made him hate his own race."

"I followed him, and though pitying, I could not cease to love, and his crimes have hardened me not toward him."

"My world is with him, in his love, and so I am content to live and die."

"I know how grievous are his sins and mine in clinging to him; but still so let it be."

"You are answered, sergeant."

"And I thank you for your confidence, madam, and I pity you for the noble love that has caused you to throw your life away."

"Ah! the Deserter Sergeant can turn preacher at will!"

He saw the sneer in the tones, and he at once decided to remain silent, and nothing more was said until they came in sight of the cabin of Snow Face.

The renegade still lounged in the hammock, but at sight of his wife and her escort, sprung to his feet, and his eyes blazed with anger as the pretended Deserter Sergeant dismounted before the cabin and saluted him.

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE PARSON'S ELOQUENCE.

THE Overland coach, that had its terminus at Fort Fairview, was yet half a day distant from its destination, when just at noon the driver halted his team in the shallow bed of a crystal stream to give them a refreshing drink of cool water.

The stream glided musically over the rocks, winding its way down a narrow valley, and upon either side of the trail crossing were rocks and stunted pines, from behind which many a road-agent had pounced upon his prey in days gone by.

There were, under a large tree on the other bank, several graves, without head-board, that marked the last resting-place of victims of outlaw greed of gold.

Buck Brewer, the driver, had been along the day that the tragedy had occurred, and he was wont to say that he never passed there without thinking of the sad affair, while he made it his business never to be belated on the road and have to go by the ford after nightfall, for once, so he vowed under oath, he had seen ghostly forms hovering about the spot.

Now, as his panting horses refreshed themselves with a cool drink, Buck Brewer's eyes sadly turned upon the graves, and the tragedy came back to him in all its horror, and he muttered:

"I'm powerful glad thar be no more road-agents now."

Hardly had the words left his lips, when two forms stepped out from the thicket and rocks just ahead of him, one on each side of the trail, and one more approached almost at the stage door.

The former leveled their rifles at Buck Brewer, and the latter held a revolver in his hand and said pleasantly:

"Hot day for driving, Buck, and your critters seem warm."

"Waal, I declar'!"

It was all that the surprised driver could say.

Resistance was useless he knew, and to drive on would be his death-warrant.

Three men were in sight, and two had him covered with rifles.

How many more the rocks and thicket hid he could not tell.

The man who had so quietly spoken, laughed at the words of the driver and responded:

"Funny, hain't it, Buck; but who have yer aboard?"

"Three pussons, yer durned gerboot, an' ef yer robs 'em yer would steal pennies off yer dead granny's eyes."

"And why not rob them, Buck?"

"Waal, one are a young woman in black, as w'd make yer weep ter see her sorrow, and another are a poor preacher who do look as though ther conterbootion-box hain't been passed round fer him fer some time."

"And the third?"

"Are a young soldier, and ef yer kin rob a man as gets twelve dollars a month and his keep, then yer w'd skum a mouse fer his hide."

"I'll make the acquaintance of your trio; but I was led ter believe I'd git a rich haul from this coach."

"Yer were led ter believe a lie, Pard Road Pirit, fer I'm a-thinking thar hain't ten dollars in ther outfit."

"I shall at least see, for I don't believe I is mistaken."

As the road-agent spoke the coach-door was flung open and a man stepped out.

He was dressed in black, smooth-shaven, wore spectacles, and his clothes were clerical but seedy.

He wore a high hat that looked strangely out of place in that country, and upon his face was an expression of utter and abject woe, a kind of "Hark from the tombs" look.

The road-agent who had acted as leader started at sight of him and leveled his revolver while he cried:

"No you don't, pard, come no game on me."

"My misguided friend, I play no games, for I am an humble and lowly teacher of the Word," came in sepulchral tones from the passenger in black.

"The deuce you are?"

"Well, I suppose you have no gold with yer?"

"Gold! Oh! my poor friend, I have treasures laid up in heaven, where moth and rust—"

"See here, Pard Sky-Pilot, I don't want none o' yer preachin', for I mean business, and I am in a hurry."

"Ho, in that hearse there!"

At the call, a woman's face looked out.

It was a youthful, beautiful face, with large dark eyes and golden hair, and she was dressed in the deepest mourning, while her expression was sad in the extreme as she turned her gaze upon the robber.

"I have but little money, sir, with me—must I give you that?"

The man seemed touched by her look and words, for he answered:

"No, I want bigger game than you can pan out, miss; why don't the man in blue show up?"

"Because I thought gentlemen of the road had too much sense to expect to get blood out of a turnip," came response, and a soldier sprang out of the coach.

He wore no insignia of rank, was dressed as a private soldier, his uniform looking well worn; but he had a handsome, fearless face, and boldly confronted the robber.

"I guess you hain't got no great sum on yer; but wasn't thar a officer ter come through?"

"Lieutenant Vassar was to go through, but changed his mind and sent me."

"Curses on ye fer not having no money."

"It was the lieutenant I wanted, for he has money, as I heard; but I'll lay fer him, you bet; but as I may miss him and I need a leetle dust, I'll jist trouble yer all fer the pocket-change yer has got about yer clothes, with yer tickers and rings, and you must shell out, too, miss."

"My misguided friend, one word with you before you lay the sin upon your soul of robbing a poor girl, a penniless preacher of the Word, and one of our noble soldiers."

As the parson spoke he stepped closer up to the road-agent, who still kept his revolver covering him, and in a low, earnest tone, which even the keen ears of Buck Brewer did not hear, said something to him.

The robber's face changed, his eyes fell, and he seemed deeply moved, and his lips muttered a few words that none but the parson heard.

For some minutes the itinerant preacher kept on talking, in his low, earnest way, and the revolver was lowered, the robber seemed overcome by his eloquence and said in a broken voice:

"Pard Parson, yer has won ther game, and I pass, for yer goes on yer way, all of yer."

"Pard Buck, ef yer carries parsons often in yer old hearse yer'll break up my business, and I'll hold you responsible."

"Light out now!"

Buck Brewer needed no second order, and shouted quickly:

"All aboard!"

The soldier hastily followed the parson into the coach, the door was pulled to with a bang, and the driver whipped his horses out of the stream on their way through the valley.

For a few minutes no word was spoken by those in the stage-coach, and then the soldier said, frankly:

"I have to thank you, parson, for doing me a great favor, and the Government, too, for I am Paymaster Richard Vassar, and have a large amount of money with me which you saved from being taken, and I played the poor soldier to get through with it in safety."

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE THREE PASSENGERS.

THE remark of the soldier seemed to fairly startle the parson, who gazed at him with an expression akin to horror, when he told that he was not the private he pretended to be, but an officer, a paymaster, and the bearer of a large sum of money.

"I will ask you now, miss, for the package I intrusted to your keeping when our good friend here got out of the coach to argue with the road-agents so eloquently?" said the paymaster with a smile, and he addressed the beautiful girl in mourning, who at once handed over to him an official envelope that was very plethoric-looking.

"I thank you, miss, and I hope I can return your great kindness in some way."

"My name is Richard Vassar, a lieutenant, and I am going to Fort Fairview to relieve the paymaster now there on duty."

"I am Miss Meserole, and I too am going to Fort Fairview, sir," was the answer in the sweetest of tones, and the officer noticed as he had before that the lady spoke with a foreign accent.

The parson meanwhile had eyed the soldier curiously, and a frown was upon his brow.

Now he asked:

"Do you mean to say, young man, that you played the poor soldier to escape the road-agents?"

"I do, sir, and saved thirty thousand dollars to the Government by the trick, for no one suspected a private soldier, returning to his regiment on a furlough, for so my papers read, would have any money to speak of."

"Permit me to compliment you upon your eloquence, sir, for you certainly tamed those outlaws by what you said."

The parson groaned, as if in physical and mental pain; but just why the officer did not understand.

"My duty, sir, was to lead the sinners from their path, and I did all in my power to do so."

"I hope you will help me with the unrepentant at the fort, whither I go to gather a few stray sheep into the fold."

"My name is Black, sir, the Reverend Obadiah Black, and I only wish I had known you before, sir."

In this the "parson" was sincere, for it had nearly broken his heart to know that thirty thousand dollars had so cleverly slipped through his hands.

The truth was, the pretended parson was none other than Captain Brimstone, and it was only when he recognized three of his old band in those who attacked the coach, that he had sallied forth and made himself known, in the low, earnest words he had spoken to the man with the revolver.

He had told him that he was his chief, given him to understand that there was no booty to be had in the coach, and ordered him to go with his two comrades to the station of Tenderfoot Tom, who would direct him to Eagle Canyon, where they would find others, and there await his return, for he was going to the fort to find out just what there was in the way of booty and gold to fall into his clutches.

And such was the "eloquence" which Parson Black had brought to bear upon the road-agent, and it was no wonder that he stared at Lieutenant Vassar, and inwardly cursed himself for having allowed the largesum the paymaster had with him, to slip through his fingers.

The more that Parson Black dwelt upon the mistake that he had made, in not recognizing the fact that Lieutenant Vassar was not a private soldier, but a paymaster, the more he inwardly swore at himself.

At last the officer made a remark which completely upset the parson, for he believed he had nothing to fear from his fellow-passengers.

"There is a lady at the fort who will have reason to thank you also, Parson Black, and you too, Miss Meserole, for I happen to have five thousand dollars in money that belongs to her."

"She is a beauty and very rich, I have heard, and her income is very large."

"I was asked to carry her the sum in my possession, which is her quarterly rents, I believe, and strange to say that a like amount, sent her half a year ago, never reached her."

"It was intrusted to a young officer, along with some Government money, and he was suspected of doing away with it and reporting that he had been robbed by outlaws."

"He was cleared by a court-martial, but is believed to be guilty and so has become a social outcast, though one of the best fellows in the service."

"It would be strange if I too had lost the Government money, and that belonging to Miss Kennerley also, would it not?"

"It would indeed; but do you believe the officer guilty?" asked Miss Meserole quietly.

"I do not, for sse how easy for me to have been robbed, had you and the parson not been along, and the driver might have been killed."

The parson moved uneasily, and then said he believed he would ride with the driver to get some fresh air.

So he called to Buck Brewer to halt and clambered up to the box with him.

The idea of danger from an itinerant preacher, as he believed his companion on the box to be, never entered the head of Buck Brewer, and he drove along entertaining his passenger with stories of the road.

At length the trail led toward a steep hill, and the humane driver drew rein with the remark:

"It's a long and hard pull up, so I'll givethem their heads."

So saying he dismounted to loosen the check-reins, and had just touched the ground when a pistol-shot rung out sharp and clear.

The poor driver sank dead in his tracks, while the parson called out:

"Lieutenant! Lieutenant!"

Richard Vassar was not the man to disregard a call for help, and hardly had the cry ended, before, revolver in hand he sprang from the coach, expecting to confront another band of road-agents.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

PARSON BLACK'S "GAME."

BUCK BREWER, the Overland driver, had fallen under the deadly aim of Parson Black, who had laid a scheme to get the money which Lieutenant Vassar had in his possession.

His aim was deadly and he knew it, so had sent the bullet crashing into the head of poor Buck Brewer.

Then he had called for help, in a tone that at once brought Lieutenant Vassar to the rescue, as he supposed.

He had not fairly reached the ground before first one, then another shot came from the box, and he staggered at the first, dropped at the second.

The shots had been fired from the revolver of Parson Black.

The first had been aimed at the body, the second at the head, and both had appeared to have done deadly work.

The firing caused the third passenger to look out of the coach door.

She saw Parson Black calmly bending over the body of their driver.

Buck Brewer was the possessor of a handsome watch and chain, presented by the company for faithful services in the past, and he was fond of jewelry, and wore a diamond pin and ring.

These, with a roll of bills amounting to some forty dollars, were taken from the body of the driver and coolly transferred to the pockets of Parson Black.

"Oh! it was *you* that fired?" cried Miss Meserole, and her tone was not so full of surprise as one might have expected, nor so full of horror at the thought that the parson had done the deadly work.

"Yes, it was I who killed them," came the matter-of-fact announcement, and the parson stepped toward the form of the officer.

"I half-suspected it when I saw you go on the box."

"Yes, he talked too much."

"It is a bad habit in a woman, a crime in a man to tell all he knows."

"He carries thirty thousand dollars by his own admission, perhaps more, but we will soon know."

"You can save yourself the trouble of searching, for at your first shot he threw two packages in official envelopes into my lap, and this tobacco-pouch, which has his watch, jewelry and own money in the tobacco," and Miss Meserole held up the articles named, adding:

"On this envelope is marked the amount, you see, with *U. S. Funds*, and upon the other 'Five thousand dollars, to be delivered to Miss Kate Kennerley, care Major Denton, Fort Fairview.'"

"I see; hand them to me."

"No; they were intrusted to me, and it will be safer for me to keep them, and if you are wise you will give me what you have taken from the driver."

"Why?"

"Well, even parsons are not above suspicion, and *you* might be searched, you know, while Miss Meserole will not be."

"You are right, and wise, too."

"Take the things and be careful with them, for this is a great haul we have made to-day."

"You have given me luck, Miss Meserole; but now to our story."

"I am sorry you killed the officer and the driver, for even the man had better been lost; but then as it is done, we were held up by road-agents, whom your eloquence caused to retreat."

"Then, a couple of hours after, we were fired upon from ambush, the driver was killed, the lieutenant sprang out to meet a like fate, and your eloquence was of no avail, for we were robbed, you of your little all, I of a small sum, and the officer and driver's pockets were searched and some valuables taken from each, with some official papers from the soldier, which, of course, we knew nothing about."

"Do you see?"

"I do, and you are a dandy, Miss Meserole."

"Thanks! but then you, having had experience in driving in your younger years, took the reins and drove on to the fort, reporting the holding up of the coach at the station where we change horses, and again to the commandant."

"I will corroborate your story, though of course much alarmed by the double affair."

"Yes, and you'll play your part to perfection never fear," was the reply of Parson Black, and he spoke admiringly.

Then he closed the stage-door, and, with a glance at the two bodies, mounted the box and took the reins with the air of a man who had held the ribbons over a four-in-hand before.

Up the steep trail rolled the coach, leaving the valley and its dead behind, while Miss Meserole calmly leaned back in the back seat and seemed lost in meditation.

"I am doing well, and mine was not the hand to shed their blood," she muttered, after awhile.

A few miles further on the station was reached, where the horses were changed, and the parson reported to the man in charge what had occurred, according to his version.

"You've got pluck, pard, fer a pulpit-pounder, you has; but I don't dare leave ther station ter go so far away, fer yer say it were at ther foot o' a long hill."

"Yes, my friend, some eight miles away, I should judge."

"Yes, ten of them, for it were at Jacob's Ladder, as we calls ther long hill, which are made up of a dozen short ones."

"Waal, you jist push ther critters hard and git to ther next station, and a fresh team thar will put yer inter ther fort afore sundown an hour or so."

"Give ther cattle ther rein, and they knows ther trail, and ther general will send out a party o' soldiers to get ther bodies."

"I'm sorry, miss, yer hed ter see blood-letting."

And the man bowed to Miss Meserole, who murmured:

"It was terrible, sir."

The parson was now on the box, and he sent the horses away at a lively pace.

The next station, however, was not reached on time, for the parson was not in a hurry, and he had no desire to reach the fort before dark.

Nor did he, for the sun had gone down when the coach rolled through the stockade.

The parson made his report to the officer of the day, and was at once taken to the quarters of Colonel Cassidy, who had been in command since the day before.

After telling his story, he told of the presence of Miss Meserole, who had told him that she had come West in search of her brother, and was in deep mourning.

Colonel Cassidy first gave an order to have a squad of cavalry sent to the spot where the tragedy occurred, and assigned the parson to a tent, with permission to eat at the mess-hall, after which he went with the clerical-looking hero, as he appeared, to the cabin whither Miss Meserole had gone.

The sutler had a pleasant home, and was in the habit of taking boarders, when he could secure any, and his wife was a kindly woman and knew just how to entertain.

She had given the lady guest her best room, and made her most comfortable.

Miss Meserole welcomed the colonel in a quiet, subdued way, her sadly beautiful face showing that she suffered, or appeared to do so, and in a few words told the story of the robbery of the coach.

Then she made known her own story, to the effect that her parents had lately died, leaving their fortune to her, and cutting off her brother, who had been a wild, reckless fellow.

She had at once come West in search of him, for she had heard last from him that he intended entering the army on the border under an assumed name, and she wished to find him, redeem him from his wicked ways and share her fortune with him.

As she was in deepest mourning she wished to remain quiet, unnoticed, and declined the colonel's offer that he would have her go to the house of some married officer as a guest.

He was touched by her sad story, and promised not to have her disturbed, and Miss Meserole was left alone at the sutler's house, while Parson Black found himself quite a hero among the soldiers, whom he said he hoped to snatch from their wickedness, as "brands from the burning."

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

SURGEON POWELL SUSPICIOUS.

SERGEANT SANFORD, whom Buffalo Bill left in command of his Boys in Blue, in their secret retreat, while waiting to be called upon for their services, was a devoted huntsman, and to get game for his little band of soldiers he was wont to take his rifle and go upon a daily hunt.

While upon one of these hunts one morning, he came out upon the Overland Trail just at the base of a steep ridge, and quickly he drew his horse back into the thicket, for he had beheld some one not a hundred feet from him.

That some one had also seen him and as quickly taken cover; but he had caught sight, he thought, of a blue uniform, so called out sharply:

"Who goes there?—friend or foe?"

"Friend," came the response of Sergeant Sanford, followed by the words:

"Is that not Sergeant Powell's voice?"

"Ay, ay; who are you?"

"Sergeant Sanford, sir, of the —th Cavalry, on special service."

"All right, sergeant, come on."

The sergeant rode out of the thicket and came in full view of the fort surgeon, who was none other than Frank Powell,* hardly less noted as a plainsman than is Buffalo Bill, and his boon-companion.

Surgeon Powell was standing near a prostrate form, over which he had been standing when the sergeant came in sight, and a few feet away lay another human figure.

"Come, sergeant, for I need your aid and am glad to see you."

"I am in search of Buffalo Bill and came upon this scene, which means red work, for there lies Buck Brewer dead, and this soldier, evidently a passenger in Brewer's coach, is wounded in the head and body; but I hope we can save him."

The sergeant hesitated.

He knew Buffalo Bill had sought a secret retreat, which he did not even wish those at the fort to know; but then Surgeon Powell was the scout's most intimate friend, and, besides, here was a case of humanity, to care for a fellow-soldier whose life was at stake.

"You were seeking Mr. Cody, sir, you say?"

"Yes, for Buffalo Bill told me of his plan to run down the Brimstones, and I would have come with him, but could not be spared."

"Colonel Cassidy told me what Cody had done, so I determined to look him up at once, and am on his trail to his retreat."

"Surgeon Powell, I will take you to our retreat, sir, if you will keep it a secret from all, and we will move this soldier there, for it is hardly a mile from here."

"Of course I will keep it a secret, for I have come, as I said, to aid Cody; but we must help this poor fellow first, and then send some one here to bury the dead driver."

This the sergeant agreed to do, and while the surgeon at once set to work to dress the wounds of the soldier, whom the reader knows of as Paymaster Vassar, the sergeant started at full speed to the canyon for help.

In half an hour he returned with a squad of soldiers, who dismounted and formed a litter for the wounded man, while others buried the dead driver.

"Sergeant!"

"Yes, Surgeon Powell."

"I wish you would have your men dig two graves, and let one cut in the tree at the head of one the name of the driver, and in another simply the words, 'An unknown soldier.'"

"Yes, sir," but the sergeant looked surprised, and Surgeon Powell continued:

"Between you and I, Sanford, there has been tricky work here, for this driver was shot from the top of the stage-coach, not from an ambush, and both the wounds of this soldier show that the bullet came from above."

"Now this one in the head glanced, and I hope the skull is not broken."

"The other entered the body here, as you see, and ranged downward, and I hope it is not fatal."

"These wounds prove that whoever shot the men was a passenger on the coach, and he, or they, doubtless went in with the stage to the fort, and told their own story."

"Now Colonel Cassidy will send here to have the bodies buried, and I wish those who come to find the work done, and report two graves, so that those who are guilty will not suspect me of being alive."

"I understand, sir."

"And in going from here, you must hide your trail thoroughly, for whoever comes will surely follow the trail to see who buried the bodies."

"You are right, sir, but after we reach the northern trail at the brook, we can cover up our tracks to the canyon, so that no one can find us."

"Mr. Cody selected his retreat with this in mind."

"Very well; now have your men dig the graves, and I will go on with this wounded soldier, for his life must be saved at all hazards, sergeant."

"I hope so, sir, and if it can be you will save it, while then we can learn if it is as you suspect."

"I could learn by going to the fort, or waiting here for those who come to bury the dead; but I do not care to do this, so we must wait awhile, for the guilty ones will not escape, I am sure, having no cause to fear discovery, with their victims both dead, as they believe."

The party with the wounded man, borne on a litter, then moved away, with a soldier following with the surgeon's horse and the animals of the soldiers, and the sergeant set others to digging the two graves, while he himself cut the name of "Buck Benson, Driver of the Overland," and the date in one tree, and "An Unknown Soldier" in another at the head of the grave that held no tenant.

On his way to the retreat of the Boys in Blue, he completely covered up the trail, and when he arrived found that the wounded soldier had been given pleasant quarters, and all done to make him comfortable, while Surgeon Powell asserted that he would not die, though the chances were against him.

One of the soldiers in the retreat recognized the soldier as Paymaster Vassar, having once served with him, and Surgeon Powell knew that he was expected at the fort, and this added to the belief that the murder had been done by parties on the coach and decided the Surgeon

Scout in sending word to the fort, for he could not go himself, as he dared not leave the wounded man for any length of time.

So that afternoon Corporal Carter again set off as a messenger to the fort.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE RENEGADE CHIEF.

WHEN the scout rode up, escorted by the beautiful wife of the renegade chief, Snow Face, the latter arose to his feet, and his look and manner indicated that he was in no pleasant humor at the coming of the messenger.

Before the woman could say anything he asked sternly:

"Well, sir, what brings you here again?"

"My orders from my captain, to see you, Chief Snow Face," was the unflinching response of the pretended Deserter Sergeant.

"I met the—the gentleman this side of the outpost, chief, with four braves, so sent them back and came on with him myself," remarked the woman, as she sprung to the ground and advanced with Buffalo Bill to the piazza.

"You have but taken your life in your own hands by coming here," said Snow Face, angrily.

The scout stepped upon the piazza, and facing the irate renegade said:

"Chief Snow Face, let us understand each other at once."

"You are a renegade, a fugitive from the law for crimes done, and a price is upon your head for your acts here."

"In truth, you are a hunted man, and only the strength of your position here and your many braves, prevent your being driven to bay and captured."

"I am a fugitive also, a hunted man, and I have no braves to protect me, but a fellow-feeling should make us friends, not foes."

"My captain was forced to fly for his life, and more than two-thirds of his band were killed, or captured and hanged; but he escaped, and is once more upon the Gold Trail, and sent me to tell you so, to ask you to once more become his ally and support him when he is driven into your country."

"He will share most liberally with you, and as he has but half a dozen men, in fact, not that many yet, he wishes to get you to let him have a dozen of your picked warriors."

"He will pay them well for their services, and through them send booty to their people, while you will of course share differently."

"Now, sir, you know why I am here a second time—why I have taken my life in my hands to come to see you."

The scout spoke in a manly way, his voice clear and fearless, and the renegade listened to him with a grim smile the while that boded no good.

The woman had thrown herself into a chair and looked calmly on, as though the affair held little if any interest for her.

When the supposed Deserter Sergeant had finished speaking, the chief said, sternly:

"You made a pledge when you were here before?"

"Not to betray the presence in your village of this lady?"

"Yes; did you keep it?"

"Faithfully."

"Then you gave no hint to Captain Brimstone that a white lady was here?"

"I did not."

"Can I believe you?"

"I do not know, and do not care; but it seems to me if Captain Brimstone held interest in the lady's presence here he would hardly wish you as his ally."

"Perhaps not; but when you left here before you killed two of my best men, a chief and a brave."

"Oh, yes; I killed two of your red-skins, whom you sent to lie in ambush for me."

"I am interested in knowing how you got the best of those two men."

The scout laughed and replied:

"I suspected you of treachery, so put a dummy in my saddle—grass stuffed into my coat, with my hat and boots on, and they killed it, and when they sought to take its scalp, why, I simply killed them."

"You are a remarkable man, Buffalo Bill."

"Buffalo Bill! why do you call me by that name?" And not a shadow crossed the scout's face.

"Because you are playing a part, and I believe you are Buffalo Bill, who, having captured or killed the Deserter Sergeant, are impersonating him to lead both Captain Brimstone and myself into a trap."

The scout laughed, and his face was so utterly devoid of emotion that the renegade felt that his sudden accusation had not been successful, for he half-suspected that it was as he had said.

"The best way for you to find out is to send a brave to Captain Brimstone to find out just where Buffalo Bill is."

"If he can be found, then I cannot be ho."

"True; but Buffalo Bill certainly broke up the Brimstone Brotherhood before, and got me and my braves into trouble; and I suspected then that he had been playing the Deserter Sergeant."

*Doctor Frank Powell, now living in La Crosse, Wis., and once known as Surgeon Scout, Dandy Doctor, and White Beaver.—THE AUTHOR.

"No. I am myself, no one else, and I am careful to give Scout Cody a wide berth; but what about my mission to you?"

"I'll send a warrior to Captain Brimstone, telling him I will agree to his terms on condition that he never comes to my village, and my letter shall state also that my braves recognized you as Buffalo Bill and demanded your life, and, as I believed you really to be the scout, playing a game of treachery to both of us, I gave you over to my young men to torture you to death."

"And do you mean to do an act so cruel?" demanded the scout, sternly.

"Of course I do; for what care I for your life any more than for that of a snarling coyote?" was the sneering response of Snow Face, the Renegade Chief.

CHAPTER XL. A FAIR PLEADER.

THAT Snow Face, the renegade chief, meant to do, just as he threatened, there was no doubt.

He had no fear of God or man, and having suffered in the past, he had become merciless, and rather enjoyed the sufferings of others.

That he did intend to carry out his vile threat the scout did not doubt; but even under the certainty that he was fully capable of it, he did not flinch, and quietly remarked:

"You are master here, you have the power, and you may use it and take my life."

Had not Buffalo Bill had the pledge of the beautiful woman to save him, had he not caught a quick look intended to give him hope, Snow Face would never have uttered another word, for in his sleeve the scout had a revolver, and dropping it into his hand, he would have shot the renegade dead, sprung upon his horse and taken his chances with the sentinels in the canyon, for he knew pursuit of him would not follow for some half-hour, at least a pursuit that he would have much reason to dread, and he might pass the outpost in safety without suspicion.

Once beyond them his long range repeating-rifle would keep the red-skins at bay, and in his horse he had perfect confidence.

It would have been desperate odds to take, but then his situation was a desperate one.

"Well, sir, I will summon my braves, and turn you over to them as Buffalo Bill, and your fate will be a fearful one," said the renegade.

As he uttered the words, the woman arose, and stepping up to his side, laid her hand firmly upon his arm.

"Douglass," she said, softly. "Douglass, listen to me."

"Well?" he said, sharply.

"This man has done you no wrong, and like you, he is under a brand that has turned the hand of every one against him."

"Who can tell his motive for crime any more than we can look into your heart and tell yours?"

"He came here as a messenger from his leader, he did his duty, took great risks, and, you remember, boldly defied us when brought to bay, and showed that he possessed magnificent courage."

"He killed those you sent to kill him, just as you would have done, and you may be sure that he kept his pledge and did not betray my presence here, or Edmund Allyn would have been here or would have let you hear from him."

"He has dared come here again, and it is only a suspicion on your part that he is Buffalo Bill."

"Even that noted scout would not twice dare play the game you say this man is playing, so go slow in what you do."

"If you suspect him, then make him your prisoner; put him in the cavern with one of your most faithful warriors constantly on guard over him."

"There is no escape for him from there, ironed as he will be to the rocks, and you can see Captain Brimstone and learn the truth."

"If he has betrayed his pledge not to tell of my being here, if he is really Buffalo Bill, why, then you will have him in your power here and can make him suffer as you deem best."

"But not now; no, not now."

"Do this for me, Douglass."

And the beautiful pleader gazed up into the cruel eyes of the man with a look that at once seemed to win him over, for he replied:

"Very well; it will but be a postponement of his death, I feel assured."

"Give me my bugle."

She handed him a silver bugle that hung near, and he gave three long blasts upon it, evidently a signal.

Then he turned to Buffalo Bill and remarked:

"Will you quietly give up your weapons and surrender yourself prisoner, or will you resist and have me set my red hounds upon you?"

"I will surrender, as I must; but let me say to you that you owe that lady your life, for, had you not yielded to her kind pleading for me, I would have shot you dead and made my escape."

"See here!"

And he dropped the revolver from his sleeve into his hand.

The renegade's face slightly changed, for he

realized how narrow had been his escape from death, and he remarked, significantly:

"It is not the first time, sir, that this lady has saved my life."

"There come my braves, so I shall place you in irons and under guard as a prisoner, to be held until I know the truth about you."

The scout bowed, and just then a chief and half a dozen warriors rode up on their ponies, in answer to the signal-call of the renegade.

"Red Hawk, take this prisoner to the cavern yonder, iron him to the rocks in the inner prison and select four of your braves to guard him, one at a time, day and night."

The renegade spoke in the Sioux tongue, and the Indian addressed replied:

"The mighty chief Snow Face has spoken, and the Red Hawk will do as he is told."

Stepping up to the scout, he grasped him by the arm, with the manner of a man who expected resistance, and led him to the rear of the cabin.

There, in the rocky cliff, was a cavern, and a dozen feet from the entrance was a wall of logs, with openings for air and light between.

A narrow door was cut in them, and beyond was a large cavern in which lay a pile of buffalo-ropes, and a chain with manacles had been made fast to a pile of rocks, showing that the renegade chief had made a secure prison for any unfortunate that might fall into his hands.

The scout was at once ironed by Red Hawk, who showed that he had been instructed in the work, and a sentinel was placed outside of the cavern, so to escape from such a prison and keeper seemed even to Buffalo Bill an utter impossibility.

CHAPTER XLI. UNDER SUSPICION.

CORPORAL CARTER started upon his second mission to the fort with the air of one who knew only how to do his duty.

He carried a letter from Surgeon Powell, and was told to arrive at Fort Fairview and depart under cover of the night, so that no attention would be attracted to his coming and going.

This he did, and Colonel Cassidy was seated in his quarters, smoking his nightcap cigar before retiring, when the corporal was announced by the orderly.

He was at once admitted, and presented his letter, which the colonel took and at once broke open.

"You look tired, corporal; be seated," he said pleasantly.

He had an hour before received a report from the officer returning from the scene of the tragedy to the stage-coach, in which he had been told that there were two graves there, dug by some one unknown, and that the dead driver and soldier had been buried.

To follow the trail beyond that point the officer had found impossible, but supposed that the two bodies had been decently buried by some scouting party, perhaps by Buffalo Bill, who was known to be absent from the fort with some men.

This report but carried out what had been told by Parson Black and Miss Meserole, but it proved to be a mystery as to who had buried the dead driver and soldier, and again as to who the soldier could be.

The colonel now turned to the letter brought by the corporal, with the hope that it would shed some light upon the subject, when the latter, in response to the request to sit down, said:

"If you please, sir, I am to go back to-night, and if you will allow me I'll go and get some supper and feed my horse while you are reading the letter, sir."

"Certainly, return within an hour, corporal," was the reply of Colonel Cassidy, who when alone read his letter half aloud.

The Surgeon Scout wrote a hand that it was a pleasure to read, and told his story in a concise manner:

"I have the honor to report," he wrote, "that after gaining your permission to look up Buffalo Bill, I happened to cross the Overland Trail at a point where a tragedy had occurred, without doubt an attack upon the coach, for Buck Brewer, driver, was dead, and a soldier in a private's uniform was lying wounded in the roadway."

"Both had been robbed and left for dead, and it is my belief that the perpetrators were passengers on the coach."

"I fortunately happened upon Sergeant Sanford, of Buffalo Bill's Boys in Blue, who was hunting for his men, they being in hiding near awaiting the scout's return, and the wounded man was borne to the retreat, and I believe will recover."

"I had the driver buried and another grave made, hoping to throw off the scent any one you might send to bury the dead, and thus place at ease those who did the deed, by letting them remain in ignorance that one of their victims yet lives."

"You of course know, sir, who came in the coach, and will be able to judge if I am right or not in my surmise, which is founded upon the nature of the wounds received by the two men."

"Upon arriving at the retreat, one of the soldiers recognized the wounded man as Paymaster Richard Vassar, so this looks more like an attack by passengers on the coach."

"I dare not leave him, so shall remain and devote myself to his recovery."

"As for Buffalo Bill, he boldly went on an expedition, impersonating the Desertier Sergeant, of

whom you have heard, and I hope for the best, though dread the worst."

"He certainly is on the trail of success, if his plans do not miscarry and he is not recognized."

"He gave the sergeant certain orders, should he not return within two weeks from the day of his departure, but he has yet more than ten days before the time is up."

"Pardon me if I suggest that it will be better to say nothing of my suspicions that the murders were committed by parties who were passengers, as you will know just who they are, if, as I suppose, they went on to Fort Fairview."

"Should aught of importance transpire, I will at once send a courier with full particulars."

"I have the honor to be, etc."

Such was the letter of Surgeon Powell, and the colonel read it through twice carefully.

"Powell is wrong about the passengers committing the crime; but it certainly does look suspicious when poor Paymaster Vassar is the victim."

"He was dressed as a private soldier, it seems, doubtless to appear as having no money, and may have had a considerable amount of funds with him, for the Parson and Miss Meserole stated that the road-agents took some official-looking papers from him."

"I have their written reports, so will send Powell a copy, and write him that he is wrong, as he will see when he knows only an itinerant preacher and a young girl were passengers in the coach."

So saying the colonel turned to his desk and copied the reports referred to, of the parson and Miss Meserole, and wrote Surgeon Powell a letter congratulating him upon his timely arrival upon the scene, and telling him he must do all in his power to save the wounded officer, for if he recovered he might give a clew that would bring about the capture of the road-agents.

As he finished his letter Corporal Carter reported, and soon after was once more on the trail back to the retreat of Buffalo Bill's Boys in Blue.

He reached the canyon without particular adventure, and his first question was to ask about Paymaster Vassar's condition.

"He lies in a stupor, and I still believe will live; but you made excellent time, corporal," replied Surgeon Powell, as he took the letter handed him by the messenger.

He read it carefully through and then the reports of the parson and Miss Meserole, and muttered:

"This looks all right, but I'll stake my reputation as a surgeon on it that the wounds received by Paymaster Vassar came from the top of the coach, as did the one that killed poor Brewer also."

"A parson and a young lady were the only passengers, Colonel Cassidy says, and he sends me a copy of their reports."

"Still I am not convinced; but I am glad he says he will make no mention of hearing from me or of my suspicions."

"I only hope I may bring the paymaster around soon, so that I can learn the truth, for somehow I suspect that parson and the young lady, ridiculous as it seems to do so."

CHAPTER XLII.

THE MASK THROWN OFF.

THE presence of Miss Meserole was soon known to all in the fort, along with that of Parson Black, but in the latter the interest did not center more than to admit that he had been something of a hero in driving the stage in after the attack upon it.

There was no chaplain just then in the fort, and a few of the devout ones hoped to hear the parson preach on the following Sunday, and there the interest in him ceased, unless it was to wonder why he had come to feed upon the pastures of another shepherd, for the regular chaplain was only away on leave for a few weeks.

But the news had gone abroad that Miss Meserole was beautiful, spoke with the sweetest of accents, was rich and in search of a wayward brother, who had enlisted under a name she did not know, and hence she could only find him by a recognition of him in the camps.

That Colonel Cassidy had urged her to become the guest of some of the married officers was known, as also that she had decided to remain at the sutler's and wished to meet no one, for she was in deep mourning for her dead parents.

The young officers were on the *qui vive* for a glimpse of her, but she kept close to her quarters for a couple of days after her arrival, and then a graceful form was seen going toward the sutler's cabin.

It was Kate Kennerley, who had heard the sad story of the young girl, and with a heart ever full of sympathy, had decided to at once go and see her.

Miss Meserole received her graciously, but with a manner that was touchingly sad.

But Kate Kennerley drew her out, and at last asked her if she did not wish to join her in a ride, for Miss Meserole had expressed herself as being devoted to horseback exercise.

Miss Kennerley would lend her one of her horses, a splendid animal, and she could have Mrs. Denton's saddle and habit, which would about fit her.

But Miss Meserole had her own habit, and would be delighted to join Miss Kennerley if no officers went along, and if Miss Kennerley would put up with the company of dear good but cranky Parson Black, who had already urged her to ride out with him.

As Kate Kennerley was willing to do this, it was decided that they should go the next afternoon for a gallop.

The parson was sent for, introduced to Miss Kennerley, and said that he would be so happy to go, for he could borrow a horse from an officer, and would get two soldiers from the colonel to go as an escort.

So the next day Miss Meserole and Kate Kennerley rode out of the fort, with the parson between them, and two soldiers trotting in the rear.

It was noticed how awkwardly the parson rode, and bets were freely offered among the young officers who saw him mount that he would be thrown before he went a mile.

But these same observers remarked upon the superb manner in which the beautiful stranger rode, and thought, if she only would remain at the fort, she would become a fair rival of the "lovely Miss Kennerley," as she was most frequently called.

The party of four followed the trail to the river, at a point several miles distant from the fort, and here the parson suggested that they should halt for a rest, and Kate Kennerley, feeling that he had really had a hard time of it, consented.

"I will take the soldiers with me, ladies, and lead the horses to water, while you gather wild flowers here in the timber," said the parson, and Kate Kennerley remarked:

"Do not go far, sir, for I am not so sure that it is just safe here, for I was once kidnapped not far from this very spot, and but for Captain Fred Forrester would have been carried away the captive of outlaws."

The parson started at the thought of danger, and raised his eyes as though praying against a like misfortune, while he said:

"The soldiers say the ford is near where we can water the horses, so I will not be far distant from you."

So he walked away, holding his horse, and the soldiers followed with their own and the other animals.

"My man, let Banks water the horses, for I wish a word with you," said the parson, and he led the way to where a steep bank overhung the swiftly-flowing and deep stream.

"My man, have you ever thought of the uncertainty of life, have you dwelt on the fact that you are a miserable sinner and may die at any moment?" asked the parson in his sepulchral tones.

The soldier confessed to having had such thoughts, and Parson Black continued:

"Now see that flowing flood, and suppose you fell into it, how quickly your life would end, did you not know how to swim?"

"I do not know how to swim well, sir, and it would take a bold swimmer indeed to breast that stream," and the soldier shuddered as he looked down into the surging waters.

Suddenly the arm of the parson was raised, and without warning he dealt the soldier a stunning, terrible blow upon the temple.

The man reeled and without a moan fell over the bank into the waters twenty feet below, sinking at once from sight.

"Banks!" called out the parson.

"Yes, sir," and other soldier came forward and joined him.

"Banks, our lamented friend here has fallen into the drink, and an attempt to save him would be useless."

"Doubtless, sir," was the significant reply.

"Now, Banks, I must confess to my surprise and pleasure when I recognized you, and you said you had enlisted as a soldier, after our unfortunate breaking up."

"Did you prepare for this ride as I told you?"

"Yes, sir, all but the ladies' horses carry food and blankets, and I packed the saddle-pockets of the animal you ride full."

"You did well; but about Miss Meserole's things?"

"They are neatly folded in the blanket under her saddle, sir."

"All right, you can go after the ladies, aid them to mount and say that I will join them here, as I have something to show them, and see that Miss Kennerley's lariat is where I can grasp it."

"You are sure she is not armed?"

"There is a revolver in her saddle-holster, sir, but I saw to it that she cannot fire it."

"Good! now go, and as you return I will ride alongside of Miss Kennerley and boldly tell her she is my prisoner, while you do the same for Miss Meserole, though the latter will not be dangerous."

"Still it will be well to have Miss Kennerley believe that she is also kidnapped."

"I understand, sir," and mounting his horse and leading the two with side saddles, Banks, the traitor-soldier, rode back for the two ladies, while Parson Black went to where his horse and that of the man he had hurled into the river were hitched and waiting.

He mounted now in no awkward manner, but like a perfect horseman, and as Banks rode up with the two ladies, suddenly wheeled his horse alongside of that of Kate Kennerley, and seized the lariat about his neck, and which hung in a coil upon her saddle-horn.

At the same instant Banks seized the horse of Miss Meserole.

"Miss Kennerley, and you, Miss Meserole, I may as well throw off my clerical mask and tell you that I am not Parson Black, but Captain Brimstone, and you are my prisoners, so must go with me!"

A cry of indignation and anger broke from the lips of Kate Kennerley, and she dropped her hand to the revolver in her saddle-holster, while she called out:

"Banks, this man confesses to be an outlaw—let us capture him!"

CHAPTER XLIII.

KIDNAPPED.

WHEN Kate Kennerley, in her indignant anger, turned to Banks, she had no idea that he, too, was a traitor.

But she saw that he had grasped the lariat of Miss Meserole's horse, and seemed to be in league with the daring man who had proclaimed himself Captain Brimstone.

A glance, too, showed her that Miss Meserole seemed paralyzed by fear, for she sat like a statue in her saddle, incapable, it appeared, of doing aught to help herself.

In looking for the other soldier, Kate Kennerley's heart almost sunk with dread as she beheld his riderless horse, and he not in sight.

But she did not despair, and quick as a flash she drew her revolver and leveled it at the heart of her kidnapper.

"Unloose my rein, sir, or I will fire!"

"My dear Miss Kennerley, you are a plucky woman, but your revolver is worthless, permit me to say, the other soldier is at the bottom of the river, and Banks here is one of my men, who in a streak of bad luck and fright, enlisted as one of Uncle Sam's Boys in Blue."

"Now, I do not wish to use force with you or with that trembling girl; but unless you submit quietly I will, with your lariat, bind you both to your saddles, for I tell you frankly you are kidnapped, to be held for the largest ransom I can get from you both."

"And you did not know this man as he is?" cried Kate, turning to Miss Meserole, who answered, faintly:

"How could I suspect such villainy?"

"Forgive me, for who could?"

"Oh, no; I played my cards too well, Miss Kennerley, for any one to doubt me."

"It was my men who robbed the stage-coach, and wishing to get information as to the movement of army trains and gold from the mines I came on to the fort as Parson Black, and I know all that I care to, to enrich me."

"Now you two will go with me, and I will treat you well and politely, and arrange as quickly as possible your ransom; but, act ugly toward me, and refuse to obey my orders, and I will bind you both securely and treat you as I would a male prisoner."

"Do you understand me, young ladies?"

"Perfectly; and I have no desire to be treated with disrespect, so shall obey orders, as I am sure Miss Meserole will also."

"Yes, yes; only do not bind us," was the low reply.

"This is as it should be."

"Now, Banks, tie these two horses together and ride in front with the line fast to your saddle horn."

"I will lead the way, and our pace must be a swift one, for by dark we should place fifteen miles behind us."

"Yes, sir," answered the soldier, and he promptly obeyed, and the party set off, the horse of the dead man by the side of the outlaw captain.

Thus they rode along for some distance to the ford, which was cautiously crossed, as it was attended with considerable danger, and once over, the animals were pushed into a rapid gallop.

"This is terrible," said Miss Meserole, after they had crossed the river and were riding swiftly along.

"Do not mind it, for it's gold the villain wants, and our freedom is worth his price, and I will gladly pay my ransom, as I suppose you will, for I heard that you were rich."

"Oh, yes, I will gladly pay it," said Miss Meserole, who seemed almost crushed by the blow that had fallen upon them, or at least Kate Kennerley thought so and did all in her power to cheer up her beautiful companion in misfortune.

"You will soon have a force from the fort after you, and woe be unto you, my bold outlaw captain, if Captain Forrester should come in pursuit," said Kate.

"No, they will not send out a party from the fort until we fail to return at nightfall."

"Then they cannot trail us, and when they do strike our trail in the morning we will have forty miles' start, and I can over up our tracks and

throw their best scouts off the scent, for Buffalo Bill is not at the fort now, nor is the Surgeon Scout, Frank Powell."

"True, but Captain Forrester is a good trailer," persisted Kate, hopefully.

"Yet he has about all he can attend to just now."

"What do you mean?"

"Simply that there was a rumor in camp that he had gone out this afternoon to fight a duel with Lieutenant Blackford," was the startling response of the outlaw chief.

CHAPTER XLIV.

A MEETING DEMANDED.

LIEUTENANT BURKE BLACKFORD was not a man to put up with an insult, even though his own words or acts had called it forth.

He was a good officer, yet a fop, and lazy at all times, but he had great family influence, and it had sometimes saved him from scrapes which other less fortunate officers would have suffered for.

Burke Blackford had made up his mind to marry Kate Kennerley, she being *nolens volens*.

He knew just what her fortune was, she was beautiful in face and form, lovely in character, and with such a wife, and her money, he would be perfectly happy.

He had the conceit to take coquetry on her part for secret love for him, and he was as persistent as an Indian in following the trail to the end.

He believed, or pretended that he did, Captain Forrester guilty of charges against him.

That the money had been returned in fact to the Government and Miss Kennerley had not cleared Forrester, but simply convinced him that the officer had not been robbed as he asserted, but had hidden the treasure and kept it until he saw that he had become a social outcast, and then had gotten it and returned it to clear his name.

He hated Forrester also because he had once saved Miss Kennerley from being kidnapped, and again served him well.

He saw that Kate Kennerley really liked the captain, or pretended to do so, and at times he almost feared that she loved him, and that there was an understanding of some kind between them.

Miss Kennerley was certainly brave enough to treat the outcast officer with marked courtesy in public, and all this fretted Lieutenant Blackford, especially when he saw that both Major Denton and his wife seemed to be glad to have their ward with Forrester.

So, with an impulse which he could not resist, and which he knew was wrong, he had, when he heard Forrester come and tell Kate Kennerley that he was to go with her to Major Denton's quarters after her music, hastened to the dressing-room, thrown a cloak around him and put on a slouch hat belonging to some one else, and taken up his stand behind a large tree.

He had seen them pass and had heard nothing.

He had seen the light turned up the moment they entered the parlor, and they appeared when the light was lowered again.

They also had remained in the parlor but a very short time.

Then he heard nothing on their way back, and yet he was madly jealous, and when he knew that Fred Forrester had discovered his eavesdropping, he was furious, especially at the biting words flung into his teeth.

He expected nothing but that Fred Forrester would make his act known, and was in dread that it would be all over the fort the next day.

But it was not, and nothing in the treatment of his friends showed that Forrester had betrayed him.

Then he was sent off on a scout, and when he returned, Captain Fred Forrester was away.

It was he who was sent to bury the bodies of the dead driver and soldier, and upon his return he discovered that Miss Kennerley had gone out for a ride with Forrester, though she had declined to go with him.

Angry at this, he had decided to take notice of Forrester's insulting words to him the night of his eavesdropping affair.

He knew that it could not be proven on him, and that many would say that it was a false charge trumped up by Forrester to injure him.

So he sat down and wrote a note as follows:

"CAPTAIN FRED FORRESTER:—

"Sir:—Circumstances, which you can understand, have caused me to delay in taking notice of your unwarrantable language to me upon the night of General Carr's reception to Colonel Cassidy, but now an opportunity offers when I can call you to account for your insult, and unless a written apology is returned to me by my friend who hands you this, he is instructed to act for me, if you will waive rank and give me the satisfaction it is my right to demand, especially as I waive the fact that you are a social outcast from army society. Yours, etc.,

"BURKE BLACKFORD."

Sending an orderly for a friend, Lieutenant Blackford awaited his coming.

In a short while Captain Harry Hazard entered Burke Blackford's quarters, and the latter said:

"Captain, I have gotten into a mess with For-

rester, and there is but one way out of it, and that is a written apology from him."

"I am sorry, Blackford, for I have always looked upon Forrester as a wronged man since this affair turned out as it did, though there is a mystery about it, I admit, which I cannot fathom."

"You are his friend, then?"

"Oh, no: yours, of course, as you ask it, and I only regret any more trouble for him, as it may end in his dismissal."

"What is the row?"

"Oh, his insane jealousy because Miss Kennerley was kind to me, and his hot temper which made him forget to choose his words."

"Well, you wish an apology?"

"Yes; here is my letter, and if he refuses, just challenge him for me."

"This is serious, and I hope can be arranged, for you know dueling is not popular with the powers that be."

"I know it, but I must risk dismissal."

"And death, for Forrester is a dangerous foe, Blackford."

"Yes; but you forget that I have never met my equal with sword or pistol."

"You have never met Forrester, have you?"

"No, for he seldom shoots or fences; but I leave all with you, captain."

"All right; here goes."

And Captain Harry Hazard, a dashing officer and a splendid fellow, went on his unpleasant errand.

Captain Forrester looked up with surprise when he saw Hazard enter his quarters, and, rising, politely asked:

"To what official duty am I indebted for the honor of this call, Captain Hazard?"

"I come from my friend, Lieutenant Blackford, Captain Forrester, and am the bearer of a letter which explains itself, and which I hope you may be able to see a way that will prove a difficulty."

Fred Forrester bowed and read the letter.

"Did Lieutenant Blackford tell you the cause of the insult?"

"He did not."

"Then I shall not, and please so say to him for me; but as for an apology to him, I certainly shall not make one, nor do I see how he could offer, or I accept one from him."

"Then I am instructed to ask you to waive rank and meet my friend Blackford on the field."

"Oh, certainly; when will it be most convenient to him, and has he any preference in regard to weapons?" was the cool reply of Fred Forrester.

CHAPTER XLV.

THE MEETING.

CAPTAIN HARRY HAZARD was considerably taken aback by the cool manner of Fred Forrester, and his great generosity in waiving his right to select place, time and weapons.

There was no man in the army that dared doubt the indomitable pluck of the outcast officer, but this was an affair that was out of the usual run, and Captain Hazard well understood it so.

"It is your right, Captain Forrester, as you surely know, being the challenged party, to select time and place and to name weapons?"

"I waive all rights, sir, in favor of Lieutenant Blackford."

"Then if you will name your friend, sir, I will call upon him."

The lips of the outcast officer quivered, and Captain Hazard was touched by the sad expression that swept over his face, as he said in a low tone that was most touching:

"I have no friend, Captain Hazard."

"But you can name some one, surely."

"Surgeon Powell is away and Buffalo Bill is also absent, while Major Denton would not allow a meeting."

"No, I can ask no one, nor will I."

"I respect you, Captain Hazard, and will leave all in your hands, so suit yourself as to weapons, time and place."

"I will be there, and alone."

"But, Captain Forrester, this is not as it should be."

"It is only on such terms I shall meet your friend, sir."

"You act for him, and you can see that my weapons are all right, too."

"I shall go alone to the field."

Harry Hazard saw that Captain Forrester was determined, so he said:

"Very well, sir, we will carry both pistols and swords to the field, and to guard against suspicion I will say that my friend, his surgeon and myself will be at the Group of Rocks on the river at four o'clock sharp to-day, as we can return in time for parade; but I hope you will not come alone, Captain Forrester."

"It is my habit to be alone of late, sir, and I shall not break through with my rule."

"At four o'clock I will meet you at the Group of Rocks," and Fred Forrester bowed as though to terminate the interview.

Captain Hazard arose, bowed, walked toward the door, and then turned abruptly with the remark:

"Forrester, now that this affair is arranged,

permit me to say to you that I am your friend, and I have tried to show it by my manner, but you have always rebuffed me."

"If I believed, or pretended to believe, as others against you, I would not now offer you my hand."

"Will you take it?"

Again the lips quivered, but the answer came promptly:

"Certainly, Hazard, for I am not indifferent to friendship, though at war with the world."

"I appreciate your advances, for I know your noble reasons."

And the two grasped hands, while Captain Harry Hazard turned in silence and left the quarters of the man he admired and pitied.

After partaking of his lonely lunch, for he messed alone, Fred Forrester wrote some letters and placed them in his desk.

Then he called for his horse, and with his rifle slung at his back, as though going on an afternoon hunt for game, rode away from the fort.

Soon after an ambulance drove out of the rear gate of the fort, and it carried Captain Hazard, Lieutenant Blackford and Assistant-Surgeon Dunn.

Captain Hazard held the reins over a fine pair of mules, preferring to mix no private soldier up in the affair; but, for all that, the loquacious valet of Burke Blackford had suspected something wrong and had set the rumor afloat that his master was preparing to fight a duel and he guessed it was with Captain Fred Forrester.

It was in this way that the rumor had reached the ears of Banks, and he had told Parson Black of the affair.

When the ambulance drew rein at the Group of Rocks Fred Forrester was discovered already ahead of them and waiting.

His well-trained horse was waiting near and feeding, and the rider leant against a tree and seemed lost in thought.

He bowed to the others, and a smile crossed his face as he met Captain Hazard, who said:

"I received your swords and pistols, sent by the orderly, Captain Forrester, and brought them with me, for we preferred them to the weapons of Lieutenant Blackford."

"May I ask if this matter cannot be arranged, however?"

"I certainly do not see how, for Lieutenant Blackford challenges me for words which I will not retract."

Captain Hazard bowed and replied:

"I am ignorant of the cause of this meeting, for Mr. Blackford has not given me his confidence; but I would be glad to see a peaceful settlement of the affair."

"Were you in the confidence of Mr. Blackford, sir, you would understand that I could not retract, nor could he fail to demand satisfaction."

"I am ready, Captain Blackford, and if the weapons are to be pistols, I leave it to you to load mine."

"I appreciate your confidence, Captain Forrester, but we will begin with swords, hoping it will not be necessary to resort to more deadly weapons."

"As you please."

The swords were taken from the box—a perfect pair of rapiers—and the two officers took position, measured blades and crossed.

Burke Blackford was proud of his skill as a swordsman, and wore a confident smile upon his face as the blades crossed viciously.

But the smile quickly left the face, which paled to the hue of death when he found himself disarmed with ease and heard the words, calmly spoken:

"I wish not your life on my hands, Lieutenant Blackford, so give it to you."

Captain Hazard and Surgeon Dunn were also amazed, for they knew the skill of both men, but had not expected that Fred Forrester's was so much greater than Blackford's.

"Then the affair ends here," and Captain Hazard stepped forward.

"We brought pistols, I believe, in case swords failed," drawled forth Burke Blackford, but a wicked look in his eyes accompanied his words, and not even a bow showed his appreciation of the generosity just shown him by his adversary.

"Really, Blackford, this is not just," said Captain Hazard warmly.

"I will be more than happy to oblige Lieutenant Blackford by a change of weapons, as he seems anxious to have a souvenir of my aim."

This settled it, and the dueling-pistols were taken from the box and loaded.

"Get your instruments ready, Dunn, for Forrester's humor this time is to draw blood, and I don't blame him," whispered Captain Hazard.

"Blackford looks ugly too," the surgeon answered.

As Captain Hazard placed the pistol in Fred Forrester's hand the latter said:

"I do not intend to kill your friend, Captain Hazard; but I shall wing him."

A moment more and Harry Hazard's tenor voice rung out clear with the so often fatally-spoken words:

"Gentlemen, are you ready?"

"Fire! One—"

There were two reports, one following the other quickly.

The first shot had come from Forrester's pistol, and the bullet had cut through the arm of his adversary, the shock causing him to discharge his weapon as it fell from his hand.

But the bullet flew wide, and the surgeon sprang to the side of Burke Blackford, whose face was now livid, his lips set.

"It is but a flesh-wound, I am glad to say," said Surgeon Dunn.

"It was intended to kill; but my God! how quick he is," hissed Blackford.

"It was not meant to kill, for he told me he only meant to wing you, Blackford, and twice he has spared you," and Harry Hazard spoke with some indignation of tone.

"I may go now, Captain Hazard, I suppose?" and Captain Forrester bowed as he spoke.

"Certainly, and I appreciate your kindness, for he is not seriously hurt."

"Oh, no, the bullet did not touch the bone," and Fred Forrester added:

"I appreciate your good services, and thank you."

Then he turned away and mounting his horse went off toward the river, while Surgeon Dunn set to work to dress the wound of Lieutenant Blackford, who seemed in an ugly humor at the result of the meeting, rather than glad at the mercy shown him by a man who had held his life twice in his hands.

CHAPTER XLVI.

A PLEDGE KEPT.

WHEN Buffalo Bill found himself a prisoner, in irons, in the cavern of Snow Face, the renegade, his brave heart felt a sinking sensation far from pleasant.

Never in his adventurous life before had he ever seen life look quite so dark, and it appeared as though there could not be for him one shadow of a chance.

Then there came to him the pledge given him by the mysterious and beautiful woman.

She had said that she would save him, and, ever ready to look upon the bright side, his hopes at once arose and he coolly settled himself to abide the alternative.

The day passed away, with the scout as patiently abiding his time as did the Indian sentinel outside of the cabin door.

Then a squaw came in with his supper, and the scout saw the hand of the White Sioux Queen in what had been sent him.

It was a tempting supper, just such as had been prepared for her own table.

Later a bundle of good robes and a blanket were brought by the squaw, so that he could make himself comfortable for the night.

This proved that he was not forgotten, and at breakfast the next morning he discovered a note which was written in a beautiful feminine hand.

It read:

"With your supper will come a bottle of liquor."

"It will be drugged, so pour it into your canteen, call your red-skin guard, and give him a drink and he will fall asleep."

"The key of your manacles will be in your corn-cake; but unlock them and let it appear that you slipped them over your feet, which I noticed were very small."

"Go to the tree on the stable near the house, and you will find your horse ready for you, while your weapons are by the Indian sentinel."

"Leave the key of your manacles on the rock where you find your arms. Only your guards know you to be a prisoner, so you can pass the outpost."

"Go, and never return, and never tell your captain of my presence here with Snow Face, the renegade."

The scout read this note over several times and then put it in his pocket.

He had already discovered that he could slip his manacles off over his small feet, so would not need the key.

When his supper came, he found the corn-cake, and in it was the key, but he broke it open, yet did not disturb the key.

He found the flask and poured the contents into his canteen, which he put to his lips and pretended to drink as he caught the eyes of the Indian fixed upon him.

It was just sunset, and the light penetrated the cavern.

"Good!" he said, with gusto.

The red-skin seemed to understand what good meant, and looked wistfully at the canteen.

Then the scout said in Sioux:

"Soldier fire-water—have some?"

The Indian was human, and red-skin human, so he was tempted and fell.

He drank the prisoner's liquor with as much gusto as he would have scalped him.

He was also tempted to take another drink, and then he both felt and looked tired, and sunk down to rest.

By the time it was dark the red-skin was fast asleep, and Buffalo Bill was free.

He had noted where his weapons lay and soon had them, while he placed the piece of corn-cake, with the key in it, upon the rock.

Then he glided out of the cavern and made his way to the shed where the horses of the chief were kept.

He found his own animal, with his saddle and bridle, and led him around to the creek crossing.

A bright light burned in the cabin, and the

chief was seen there at supper with his wife, while the Indian squaw was acting as a servant.

Across the creek went the scout, and he rode rapidly along the trail to the outpost.

His approach was heard by the red-skin sentinels, but as he came from the village they expected no danger.

Recognizing him, they were on their feet in an instant, and he coolly drew rein and had a chat with them, though his heart was in his mouth for fear that any moment he might be pursued.

He told the red-skins that the chief had treated him splendidly, and he would not forget them when the Brimstone Brotherhood gathered in their plunder.

Then he left them and went on his way.

Once in the Bad Lands and he felt safe, and while he constantly listened for pursuit, he yet held no fear of recapture, splendidly mounted as he was and with his repeating-rifle to depend upon.

At length the foot-hills were left behind, the prairie was reached, and the scout could hardly refrain from a shout of triumph as he muttered:

"A free man once more, and that beautiful woman kept her pledge."

"But, Snow Face, you and I will meet again."

CHAPTER XLVII. IN THE NET.

UNTIL late at night the man who had figured as "Parson Black," pushed on with his captives and his old outlaw comrade, who, when fearing for his life, had enlisted in the army as a means of getting a good name.

Then they came to a halt in a place which Captain Brimstone knew well.

It was a halting-camp for army parties, and there was a clear stream, good grass, and a wicky-up that afforded a good shelter.

The two captives were given shelter here, and Captain Brimstone spread his blanket at the door to act as guard.

A cold supper was eaten by all, for the outlaw leader had prepared for his trip, and the four slept well until dawn.

Then they once more resumed their way, and it was several hours after sunrise before the halted for breakfast.

The girls were both fatigued, but bore up well, and Miss Meserole was silent through all, while Kate Kennerley was defiant and by no means cast down.

They ate a hearty breakfast, and, building a fire, Captain Brimstone boiled a pot of coffee which all greatly enjoyed.

The horses were showing signs of their hard ride, but were not to be spared, and once more mounting, the animals were pushed on in the same rapid gait as before.

It was just at sunset when Captain Brimstone led the party off of a well-worn trail into a rocky pass where no trace of a hoof-mark was left.

Kate Kennerley noted this, and in vain glanced about her to discover some trace by which they could be trailed.

"Buffalo Bill might, perhaps Surgeon Powell could; but no one else could follow our trail here," she murmured, and she almost lost heart.

After going over this trackless country for a mile or more, the chief turned into a canyon, the entrance of which had not been seen by Kate Kennerley until they were fairly into it.

"This looks like a solid wall, a cliff, does it not, Miss Kennerley?" said the outlaw captain with a smile.

"It does," was the cold reply.

"Even Buffalo Bill could not trail us here," added the outlaw.

"Perhaps he might."

"I'll risk it even with him; but do you know where he is?"

"Down in New Mexico, it is said at the fort."

"I am glad, for I dread that man, and also his pard, Surgeon Powell, who I am also happy to know is away from the fort."

"And do you not consider Captain Forrester a dangerous foe?"

"Oh, yes; but I have no fear of him tracking us here."

Then, as they rode on up the canyon, the outlaw continued:

"Now in this canyon is to be your home until I receive your ransom money."

"Have you thought of any price?" coolly asked Kate Kennerley.

"Yes."

"Name it."

"Well, I learn that you have an income of twenty thousand a year, so I will ask just half that sum."

"And for Miss Meserole?"

"She must pay the same."

"How is it to be arranged?"

"Well, you can write a note to the commandant of the fort, asking him to pay it for you to my messenger, and Miss Meserole can give a draft upon her bankers, which the paymaster will cash."

"I will write a note stating that if harm befalls my messenger I will put you both to death,

while, if the money is paid, an officer, Captain Forrester, if you wish, and he was not killed in the duel it was said he was to fight with Lieutenant Blackford, can return with my man to a certain point, where I will meet them with you young ladies."

"Oh, it can be arranged all right."

"Very well, I will give the draft, and Miss Meserole will doubtless do the same, and Colonel Cassidy will have the paymaster cash them, as I will be security for my companion in misfortune here, who is unknown."

"You are a brick, Miss Kennerley, and had I loved such a woman as you are I would have been a different man."

"As it is, I am what I am, and having gone to the bad can never retrace my steps."

"But here we are at my camp, and you can now be made really comfortable."

A camp-fire glimmered ahead of them now, and around it were gathered half a dozen forms, three of whom are known to the reader as Crockett, Blazes and Parson Paul.

The other three were the trio who had halted Buck Brewer's coach, and having been recognized by their captain as members of the Brimstone Brotherhood, had been sent to the Eagle Canyon to await his coming.

These six, with Captain Brimstone and the soldier Brandt, were the remnant of the Branded Outlaws.

One of the number had seen the party coming, but recognizing the captain in his clerical garb, had reported that there was no danger to be dreaded.

They had built a comfortable cabin for their chief, and to this the two captives were at once led, and they did indeed find comfortable quarters, and, after a warm supper, they soon sunk to sleep and became oblivious to the fact that they were in the power of cruel outlaws.

At least Kate Kennerley did; but Miss Meserole, when she found her fair companion asleep, slipped out of the cabin, and was joined by Captain Brimstone, who appeared to be awaiting her coming.

CHAPTER XLVIII. FOR THE BEST.

WHEN Captain Fred Forrester rode away from the scene of the duel, he let his horse take his own way.

His face was stern, and yet there was an expression upon it of triumph.

He had enjoyed his revenge, but would have preferred that Burke Blackford had not forced him to wound him, but had been content with being disarmed.

Of course he must report the affair at once to Colonel Cassidy and surrender himself; but he had not told of the reason of the duel, he had spared Blackford the mortification of having it known that he was an eavesdropper, and he really did not believe that his adversary would have been guilty of an act so wrong, had he not been insane with jealousy.

So he had spared him with a generosity which never would have been shown to him by Burke Blackford.

And more, he would not even report to Colonel Cassidy the cause of the duel, nor bring Miss Kennerley's name into the affair.

So meditating he rode over toward the river, and his horse halted on the steep bank.

Hardly had he done so when the quick eyes of the officer beheld a floating object sweep around the bend.

A moment after he saw that it was a human form, a man in uniform, and he began to struggle for life.

Quick as a flash Fred Forrester sprang from his saddle, and throwing aside his coat, heavy boots and hat had leaped into the river.

He reached the man not an instant too soon, for the soldier was struggling for life, seemed half-dazed, and, a poor swimmer, would have drowned in another moment.

But he felt a strong grasp upon him, saw the stern, brave face of Captain Forrester, and a few seconds after was dragged ashore.

"Why, Burton, it is you; but how is this that I find you here?" said the officer, and he held the man up in a sitting posture.

"Oh, captain, you saved me, sir, and God forever bless you."

"But, sir, there's deviltry abroad, for I rode out as an escort with Private Banks, the new soldier, to that devil, Parson Black, and the two ladies, Miss Kennerley and Miss Meserole."

"The parson struck me a blow, sir, back up the river, and hurled me into the stream, and I fear the worst for the ladies, sir."

"Burton, make your way up the bank as well as you can, while I go for help, for there is an ambulance near," and Captain Forrester bounded up the bank, sprang upon his horse, and was off toward the dueling-field.

The ambulance was just driving away when they saw him coming. And Captain Hazard drew rein, while he cried:

"Has Forrester gone mad?"

"Captain Hazard, Private Burton needs your aid, and the surgeon's, over on the river yonder."

"He came out as an escort to Miss Kennerley and Miss Meserole, and the parson seems to

have proven a wolf in sheep's clothing, for he struck him and hurled him into the river."

"I think it is a case of kidnapping—come!"

Away dashed Forrester, hatless, bootless and coatless, and with his clothes dripping wet.

The ambulance followed with the mules in a gallop, and soon came upon Private Burton, with his face showing the effects of the blow given him.

He told his story readily again, after Surgeon Dunn gave him a pull at the flask, and the party went to the scene, and the trained eyes of Fred Forrester read enough to tell him all that had happened.

"Captain Hazard, that preacher is a villain, and now I recall his face I am sure that I can prove my words."

"He has kidnapped the young ladies, perhaps killed Private Banks, or won him over, and I will strike their trail, for it must not get cold."

"You go to the fort and report, and follow with your company, coming here to camp, so you can be at dawn this far on the way."

"I will mark the trail well for you to follow, and please report to Colonel Cassidy the cause of my absence."

Without waiting for reply Fred Forrester made a bundle of his boots and coat, put on his hat and springing into the saddle dashed away on the trail of those he was to follow.

"Bravo for Forrester," cried Captain Hazard, and as Burton got into the ambulance he started the mules for the fort as fast as the nature of the ground would permit.

Burke Blackford groaned several times as he was rudely jostled about, but it had no effect on Harry Hazard, and when the ambulance was seen coming at breakneck speed the "long roll" sounded the alarm, the officer of the day expecting nothing else than to see a band of Indians dash out of the timber in chase of the vehicle.

But Captain Hazard said there was no danger and ordered his company to prepare for the trail; then he hastened to the quarters of Colonel Cassidy where he made a full report of all that had happened, from Burke Blackford's challenge to their arrival at the fort.

"Blackford is a jealous ass, and does not deserve the mercy shown him by Forrester," blurted out the colonel.

And Captain Hazard's nod showed that he was of the same opinion.

"He is the right man on the trail, however, from all accounts, and I hope may be the means of the recapture of the ladies to smooth over this ugly affair of a duel; but I blame Blackford the most, and hope his wound will teach him a lesson."

"I am sorry you were mixed up in it, Captain Hazard, and you must expect a reprimand, also, as well as Surgeon Dunn; but now go after those poor girls, and if you catch that devilish parson just bang him, that is all."

Half an hour after, just at sunset, Captain Harry Hazard, with two scouts and thirty cavalrymen behind him, rode away from the fort just as the sunset gun was fired, and a cheer followed him from the soldiers in the fort, where all was excitement, as the news of the duel and kidnapping had gone the rounds like wildfire.

CHAPTER XLIX.

FRED FORRESTER ON THE TRAIL.

WHEN Captain Fred Forrester left the ambulance and its occupants, he started at once upon the trail of the party who had an hour before gone along that way toward the ford of the river.

He followed the trail of the five horses as rapidly as possible, and when he reached the river the shore on the other side was still wet from the dripping of the horses he was pursuing.

Burton, the soldier, had told him that there were but the parson and the other soldier, and he knew that this might be reduced to only the kidnapper, as he had no knowledge that Banks was a traitor.

Still, he meant to rescue the two maidens at all hazards, and did not spare his horse.

Now and then as he rode along he marked his trail, and especially where it became obscure from the nature of the ground, so that Captain Hazard could the more rapidly follow.

But an hour's start is a long one, and it was near sunset before, from a hill he ascended, Fred Forrester at last caught sight of those he pursued.

There were four forms and five horses, and his glass, which he always carried with him, distinctly revealed that the soldier was not a prisoner.

"That soldier is an ally, and—My God! now I know that face, in spite of his spectacles, smoothly-shaven face and clerical dress."

"He has gone too far, and shall rue this," and the face of the officer, in spite of the exercise he had taken, became very pale, as though from some deep inward emotion.

Those he pursued were yet a long way ahead of him and night was coming on, and then, if they did not camp, he saw no chance of following their trail until the morning.

And so he urged his horse on more rapidly, and at last drew the tired animal to a halt just at dark.

To go on was useless, so he went into a lonely camp in a ravine, building a fire with matches taken from his saddle-pockets, and broiling a bird he had shot with his revolver.

His horse fared better, for he had plenty of grass and water; but Fred Forrester was accustomed to hardships, and he dried his clothes and boots by the fire and then lay down to rest, for fortunately he had a *serape* rolled up behind his saddle, and thus made himself comfortable.

The dawn had not broke when he awoke, staked his horse out in a fresh feeding-place, ate the rest of his bird and pulled on his clothes and boots, now dried.

When just light enough to see the trail, he held on once more, and had at least the satisfaction of knowing that if he was twenty miles behind those he pursued, the rescue-party was all of that behind him.

He did not spare his horse, and the faithful animal seemed to feel that much depended upon him.

At length his horse turned out of the trail, and in trying to force him back into it he saw that he had lost the tracks he had so persistently followed.

Turning back, he had lost them, he saw, for they disappeared, just where the horse had bolted the trail.

This was strange, and he set it down as the instinct of the horse, so rode back for some distance, turned, and gave the animal his head.

The horse left the valley trail just where he had done so before, and at a point where there was not the slightest sign of a track.

The other trail was very faint, and had been for some distance back, but here it was utterly lost.

So the officer gave his horse the rein, and he went on over trackless land, and yet the animal proceeded at a quick step as though he had an object in view.

It was late, and the shadows deepened as a cliff seemed to shut out further progress; but the horse held on, turned into a chasm which widened into a canyon, and held on his way in the darkness until at last the glimmer of a firelight in the distance caught the eye of Fred Forrester.

At once he came to a halt, for he could take no chances, and with his *serape* he hastily muzzled the nose of his horse, fearing that he might neigh, and then tied him to a tree.

On foot then he advanced, and with the greatest caution.

He seemed to feel that he had run the wolf to his lair, or at least he had found where he camped for the night.

Captain Hazard he knew must be yet a long way behind him, for not a horse in his company could travel as his splendid animal had done, and besides a body of men could not move as rapidly as a single horseman.

The officer, with his rifle across his arm, and his holster-revolvers stuck in his sword-belt, moved cautiously up the canyon.

A half a mile he went before he drew rein near enough to see that the glimmer of light came from a camp-fire.

It was in a copse of thick timber, built under a shelter, or roof, and rude benches surrounded it.

On these benches sat half a dozen men. This then was the wolf's den in reality, and the shelter went further to prove this.

One of the men threw more wood upon the fire, and as the blaze brightened the officer beheld a small cabin some two hundred feet away in the timber, and up the canyon were a dozen or more horses staked out.

The cabin caught his eye and he made a flank movement to get nearer to it.

As he drew nearer he beheld a form passing in front of the door, and the blaze from the fire falling upon him showed that it was the soldier Banks, and that he was on guard.

"The fellow is a traitor," he muttered, and he was about to move nearer when he heard voices, and not far from where he crouched, two forms were seen coming toward him.

One of them was a man, the other a woman. One was Parson Black, and the other could be none other than one of the captives.

Yet the two seemed strangely friendly, thought the officer.

"It would be madness to attempt a rescue alone, for I can count eight men, and doubtless there are more.

"I will return and bring Hazard to the rescue, for his best scouts can never follow the trail where I lost it, and they have not my splendid horse to follow on as he did.

"Ah! it threatens rain, so I will be off," but as he spoke the two forms halted near him, and all they said he distinctly heard.

At last they walked on, and rapidly retracing his way to his horse, he rode back along the trail until he came to some rocks hidden in a thick growth of pines.

He saw a fire and a smoke rising from it, and when the rain began to fall heavily, felt that he could at last pass the night in comparative comfort; but what he had not counted on was that the rain would be so heavy that he could not see his way.

CHAPTER L.

A COMPACT OF CRIME.

WHEN Miss Meserole left the cabin, leaving Kate Kennerley asleep, she was joined, as I have said, by Captain Brimstone.

"Well, you were successful," he said.

"Oh, yes; I dropped the powder into her coffee-cup, and she will sleep soundly until morning."

"I am glad of that, for she must not suspect you."

"Nor does she."

"No; you have played your part to perfection."

"Thank you; and I shall so play it to the end."

"Oh, yes; I have every confidence in you; but did you see my game for making ten thousand extra on you to-day?"

"I think I did, if you mean by demanding ten thousand ransom money for me."

"That is it."

"You wish me to write an order on a bank?"

"Yes."

"It will be worthless."

"What do I care if Colonel Cassidy gets the money on it from the paymaster, for you will not be there when it returns unpaid."

"But Miss Kennerley said she would guarantee it."

"Let her; she is rich."

"Well, this will be a big sum, and I believe you learned of other chances to get money."

"Oh, yes; I am posted, and as soon as I get this ransom money you are to escape and return to me, and then I'll organize my band and strike the trains and settlements, for I will have a number of red-skins with me, as I told you."

"We are doing well in our compact, are we not?"

"Oh, yes; and I knew we would from the moment that you told me you were not a Boy Bugler, but a woman."

"And my plot has made the money?"

"In a measure, yes."

"Well, let us understand our compact better."

"How do you mean?"

"I am seeking gold—and revenge."

"Yes."

"Now, I told you just who I was, and we agreed that I should put on my petticoats again and a blonde wig, dress in deepest mourning, and play the lost brother game."

"Yes."

"And that you should play the parson game."

"Ay, ay, Miss Meserole."

"Well, we went to the Overland Trail, took the stage all right, met as agreed between us, and all went well, for thirty thousand dollars you had no idea of getting fell into our hands by the taking of two lives."

"You then kidnapped Miss Kennerley and myself, and we get twenty thousand out of that, making, with the money I have in keeping, fifty thousand to divide between us."

"Oh, no, for the thirty you do not share in, Miss Meserole."

"There you are mistaken, for it is halves, you know, for all moneys taken in from the time I joined you until I leave."

"I will not agree to that," angrily said the outlaw captain.

"I do not well see how you can help it, for if you get the twenty thousand ransom money, I will still have the thirty thousand given to me for safe-keeping—ha! ha! ha! safe-keeping, by that poor paymaster."

"Now, what are you going to do about it, my dear Brimstone?"

"Curse a woman for devilry!" hissed the man.

"Where a man sets the example; but come, do not let us quarrel."

"No, but you must give into my keeping the paymaster's money."

"No, indeed."

"You are in my power, and I can take it."

"I am no fool, my dear Brimstone, so hid it, to get at my leisure, and wild horses could not drag the secret from me."

"Oh, no, when you get your ransom money, then I will hand you over five thousand, and that makes us even, fifty thousand divided between us."

"Do you see?"

The man muttered an oath at having been beaten at his own game, and by a woman.

He had intended to grab all and leave the border with it, deserting her and his men.

But she had brought him to terms by having the money, and he must yield and carry out his former plans to rob trains and coaches and raid settlements.

It was a blow to him, but he rallied quickly and determined to make the best of it, for he knew that the woman was one who would die defiantly and never yield up her secret of where she had hidden the thirty thousand dollars in her possession, with the jewelry and other things taken from the dead men.

"Well, go back to your cabin, and I will keep one of my men on guard at the door during the night, for Miss Kennerley to see, should she awake, and you say she will start at escape."

"Oh yes, and would with the shadow of a chance."

"She is self-reliant and utterly fearless."

"I like her immensely and really regret deceiving her; but then I hate her because she has money and I am poor."

"When do you send your messenger?"

"To-morrow."

"Remember, I have a bit of revenge to satiate, in the capture of Captain Forrester."

"Oh yes, I'll not forget that."

"Good-night," and the woman turned away and reentered the cabin.

And this was what Fred Forrester had overheard as he crouched in the bushes within a few feet of the two speakers.

CHAPTER LI.

WELL MET.

THE rain pattered down through the night, and crouching in his shelter, Fred Forrester tried hard to forget his painful reveries in slumber.

But sleep would not come to him, in spite of the soothing fall of raindrops upon the leaves, until long after midnight.

Then nature claimed rest, and for several hours the officer slept soundly.

When he awoke, it was broad day, and Fred Forrester got up and stretched his cramped limbs.

His horse had fared well and was rested, while he had found good grass in abundance.

Saddling him the officer rode on his way, determined to first find some game, for he had had little to eat.

A curling smoke caught his eyes, and, riding in the direction, he beheld a horse staked out, but no rider near.

At once he became cautious, when a voice called out:

"Good-morning, Captain Forrester!"

"Buffalo Bill!" cried the officer, as the scout came toward him from a pile of rocks, where he had been hiding since he saw the officer approaching.

The two warmly grasped hands, and the scout saw that Fred Forrester was pale and haggard, so said:

"You seem to have had a hard time of it, captain."

"I have, as you shall hear; but, Cody, have you anything to eat?"

"Oh, yes; I am well supplied, having started out on a long trip, and I killed a deer just at dawn and was just going to cook breakfast when I saw you."

Fred Forrester was glad to hear this, and half an hour after was enjoying some broiled steaks, crackers, baked potatoes and coffee.

"Now, Bill, I have something strange to tell you, and you must let me talk in my own way, for you are the man to help me out, as poor Hazard, I know, has lost my trail since the rain, and I know from General Carr that you have a detachment of Boys in Blue under you and they cannot be far away."

"I shall be more than happy to serve you, Captain Forrester, I assure you, and will listen most patiently to all you have to say."

"Very well, let me tell you what has happened at the fort since you left."

And Fred Forrester told of the coach coming in with Parson Black and a Miss Meserole and reporting the death of a soldier and Driver Buck Brewer.

"Parson Black is none other than Captain Brimstone, and he killed the soldier and Brewer, while the woman I can tell you nothing of, though she must be his accomplice to tell the story he did."

"You have guessed well, as my story will prove, Bill, for Parson Black is Brimstone, and the woman, Miss Meserole, as she called herself, is Billie Blew, the Boy Bugler, who is not a boy, but my wife!"

"No wonder you are surprised; but it is so, and it is the story I intend telling you, and more, they are both only a few miles from here now with half a dozen of the Brimstone Brotherhood."

Captain Forrester then went on to tell of his duel with Lieutenant Blackford, of Captain Hazard's kind friendship in it and of what followed, and how he had saved the drowning soldier, Burton.

Hearing his story, he had followed the trail to find Banks was also a traitor and that Miss Meserole was a beautiful fraud.

"I saw her in her deep mourning and blonde hair at the fort and failed to recognize her, though it struck me I had seen her before."

"And, also, I felt that I had seen Parson Black before, but did not place him."

"Now, when a cadet, that woman, then a beautiful girl by the name of Ruby Roberts, saved my life, and in and in an evil moment I asked her to be my wife."

"We were secretly married, for I was the heir of a cross old uncle who I knew would disinherit me, and Ruby and her mother wishing to get my money told the secret to the old gentleman who swore to cut me off and did."

"But they plotted to end his life first, but were too late, and so I was made a poor man, and both mother and daughter hated me then."

"The mother died, and Ruby had a wild brother who had come West and entered the army—you knew him as the Deserter Sergeant, Bill.

"She, Ruby, disguised herself as a boy, and, a splendid cornet-player, came to the fort as Billie Blew.

"I forced her to leave, under a threat to punish her for poisoning my uncle, and I believed she would do as she promised, get a divorce from me.

"I gave her a letter to my lawyers, and five thousand dollars.

"Instead she left the train and joined Captain Brimstone, and they formed a wicked compact to rob, kill and avenge, she to go as a woman, and he as a parson to the fort, and she it was who is now playing the rôle of Miss Meserole.

"Now to Parson Black.

"In truth he is Captain Brimstone, as you well know, and more, he is *Gambler Gaul*."

"The deuce he is!" said Buffalo Bill vehemently.

"Yes, and more, he is my step-brother."

"What?"

"It is true, for his father, a widower with a half-grown son, married my mother, a widow, with an only child, myself, then two years old.

"The father robbed my mother who was rich, and the son, left my guardian, when my poor mother died, robbed me.

"He spent all my inheritance, and yet, for the sake of the past I did not prosecute him.

"He became a gambler, committed a murder and fled, and I found him in a mining-camp one night, when you were with me and played for revenge, winning his money.

"It was this man who gambled among the officers, and, weak fool that I was, I did not betray him.

"I forced him to give me five thousand dollars, and that was the money that caused me so much trouble, for he disappeared and I could get no proof.

"His men robbed me of the Government money, and Miss Kennerley's, and, strange man that he is, he kept it intact, and when I, in desperation, sought him in his outlaw camp, to demand that he give me money to clear my name, he returned it all to me, and this explains to you how I got back the stolen funds."

"I understand all now," said the scout, in a low tone.

"Yes, and you were true as steel to me when you did not understand all; but let me tell you that both my wife and my wicked step-brother have gone too far, and they shall meet full punishment now.

"He, Edmund Allyn is his name, does not believe I will ever betray him, because I have been weak in the past.

"But he it was who murdered Buck Brewer and the paymaster, and she has that money with her now, so all must be known.

"As I told you, I heard all that they said, and we can catch them like rats in a trap, for you can help me."

"And I will, for not two hours' ride from here are my Boys in Blue, and, playing the part of the Deserter Sergeant, I can join the Brimstones, you know, and you can lead my Boys in Blue to the attack.

"Come, let us ride to my secret retreat, and on the way I will have a story to tell you," said the scout.

CHAPTER LII.

BOYS IN BLUE TO THE RESCUE.

THE sergeant in command of Buffalo Bill's Boys in Blue was very much delighted when returning from a hunt after game to discover none other than the scout, and with him Captain Fred Forrester.

The sergeant had just brought down a deer with a crack shot, when the scout hailed him, as he and Fred Forrester were riding toward the secret canyon, the hiding-place of the Boys in Blue.

"Well, sir, I am glad to see you, and Surgeon Powell will be, too," he cried.

"Surgeon Powell—where is he?" asked Buffalo Bill.

"In the retreat, sir, nursing the wounded paymaster, and but for the surgeon, sir, he would have died."

And the sergeant told of his meeting with Surgeon Powell, and what had followed.

He had thrown the deer across the back of his horse and ridden on with Cody and the captain, and soon after they entered the canyon, where Frank Powell greeted them with a war-whoop that an Indian might have envied, and the Boys in Blue cheered to the echo at the return of the scout.

Surgeon Powell informed them that his patient was improving and was able to tell his story, which he did, saying that he supposed he had been shot by the driver, as the shots came from the top of the stage.

After a couple of hours in the retreat, with two men left to care for the wounded paymaster, the balance of the Boys in Blue followed their

leader, Buffalo Bill, upon one side of whom rode Captain Forrester and upon the other Surgeon Powell.

Captain Forrester had declined to take command, though urged to do so by Buffalo Bill.

"No, Bill," he had replied; "yours is the trap and you are to spring it, for you have worked hard for it, and yours shall be the triumph."

They had reached the top of a ridge now and had dropped into single file, Cody going in the lead.

Suddenly he drew rein, and the line halted.

"See there!" he said, as he beckoned Fred Forrester and Surgeon Powell to approach.

They beheld, far off in the valley a large body of horsemen some three-score in number.

The three men leveled their glasses almost together, and Fred Forrester exclaimed:

"Indians!"

"Yes, and a white man leads!" Powell added.

"They are Sioux, following my trail, and the man in the lead is Snow Face, the Renegade," Buffalo Bill remarked, quietly, while Captain Forrester said, quickly:

"We can head them off at Dead Man's Pass and capture or kill the outfit."

"We can," was the quick response of the scout, and the Boys in Blue were wheeled to the rightabout and rode rapidly down the hill.

Along the valley at the base of the ridge they went at a full run, and after keeping their horses at a killing speed for half an hour they reached Dead Man's Pass.

They had little time to form in three squads, one under Surgeon Powell to open fire in the front; the second under Buffalo Bill, to dash into the canyon in the rear and cut off retreat, and the third, commanded by Captain Forrester, to charge in the front and head them off.

After delivering his fire Powell was to come up with his men to aid the other troopers.

Hardly had they gained position when the redskins entered the pass.

They were not suspecting an ambush, for they were on the trail of Buffalo Bill, and a mile more would have reached the spot where he had met Fred Forrester.

Snow Face rode in the lead, his face stern, for he had taken the trail of the scout the moment he had discovered his escape, after delivering the Indian sentinel up to the squaws and children to torture to death, as unworthy of being a brave to be trusted with the care of a prisoner.

He had followed the trail untiringly, and was determined to see Captain Brimstone while near his retreat and know the full truth about his messenger.

So, unsuspecting a trap, Snow Face and his three-score warriors rode into it, tired by their long, hard ride, and their ponies moving with heads hung low.

Suddenly, from the cliffs on either side came a withering fire from carbines and revolvers, and a dozen redskins and horses went down.

Another volley was equally as terrible, and, as the Sioux turned to fly, Buffalo Bill and his men were upon them!

The reds were panic-stricken and sought flight beyond, when Captain Forrester, with his detachment, cut his way into their midst.

The Boys in Blue were outnumbered almost three to one, at the commencement of the fight, but the red-skin ranks were quickly thinned, and then it became a merciless massacre.

A few desperate braves broke through the lines and got away, but the rest were slain, and their chief, wounded half a dozen times, was captured by Buffalo Bill in person.

The chief was not seriously hurt, and hissed forth:

"You are Buffalo Bill?"

"Yes, late the Deserter Sergeant and your guest."

"And that man?"

"I killed him some time ago, so played his part to win, and my Boys in Blue have won the game. But come; you must go with us, as Surgeon Powell will soon dress your wounds, which are not fatal, I guess."

"Where would you take me?"

"To meet your friend, Edmund Allyn."

"Hail you betrayed my secret?"

"No, but I wish you two gentlemen to meet."

Surgeon Powell having dressed the wounds of the renegade while the soldiers were burying three soldiers killed and the dead Indians, and looking after their wounded, the party set off for Eagle Canyon.

"Is there no danger of discovery, Cody?" asked Captain Forrester.

"Oh, that will make no difference, for Eagle Canyon has an entrance, but no exit, though they think it has."

It was an hour before sunset when Buffalo Bill rode alone into the canyon.

Captain Brimstone saw him and hastened to meet him, while he said:

"Welcome back, sergeant, for I am about to send a messenger to Fort Fairview, and wish your advice. You saw Snow Face?"

"Yes, sir, and he accompanied me to see you, with a dozen of his braves."

The outlaw's face whitened, while he asked, nervously:

"Where is he?"

"I left him and his braves at the entrance to

the canyon, while I came on alone. I will give the signal agreed upon."

As he spoke Cody gave a long, shrill whistle, and soon after a white horseman was seen coming up the canyon, and about him were a dozen redskins mounted upon their ponies, and in all the glory of their war-paint.

CHAPTER LIII.

STRANGELY MET.

THERE were in the canyon with Captain Brimstone his seven men, one of whom he intended to send to the fort to negotiate the ransom for Kate Kennerley and Miss Meserole. Parson Paul had been chosen for this delicate and somewhat dangerous piece of work, as Colonel Cassidy might take a notion to hang the outlaw courier.

The men wore their arms and gathered about the Deserter Sergeant, as they still believed Buffalo Bill to be, with seeming interest. Their horses were staked out up the canyon in full sight, and the fires had been lighted to cook their evening meal.

Over by the canyon, with the soldier again on duty standing near, were Kate Kennerley and Miss Meserole.

The latter had her eyes upon the scout with a strange look, though he was some distance away.

In spite of his picturesque border dress and long hair, she saw the resemblance he bore to her erring brother; but she yet dared not speak, for Captain Brimstone had told her she should see him upon his return from the Sioux village and away from the presence of Kate Kennerley.

She must play "Miss Meserole" until the ransom money was safe in the hands of the outlaw captain.

With strange feelings in his heart Captain Brimstone, Edmund Allyn, gazed upon his old-time rival as he approached. He recalled his love for Irma Enders, and her sad end after promising to become his wife if he would aid Douglass Dean, the man she loved, to escape from the gallows.

He had done so, but he had lost his bride.

And Douglass Dean's face, pale from his wounds, had become livid as he saw his old rival.

He had been forced by Buffalo Bill to ride forward as though at the head of his braves; but the braves were Boys in Blue rigged out in Indian costumes taken from the dead, and painted to carry out the cheat.

On they came, until the two men, Douglass Dean and Edmund Allyn were near to each other.

Then the outlaw saw that the renegade chief was in irons, and, as he discovered it, Buffalo Bill's revolver was thrust into his face and the words came sharp and stern:

"Edmund Allyn, you are my prisoner! I am Buffalo Bill!"

With a cheer the dozen painted soldiers dashed upon the outlaws at the same time, while, up the canyon, at full speed, came Surgeon Powell and Fred Forrester at the head of the remainder of the Boys in Blue.

Allyn was quick to act. He drew his revolver and fired upon the scout, wounding him slightly; but it gained for him his death-wound from Buffalo Bill's replying revolver, and he sunk in his tracks, while his men were quickly shot down or captured, Fred Forrester bringing down the traitor soldier at long range as he started in flight.

"We meet again, Edmund Allyn," and Douglass Dean, the Renegade, slipped from his horse and with his wrists manacled stood looking down upon his ally.

"Yes, and you are to see me die."

"So it seems, and I am to follow you, so I do not mind telling you now that I deceived you."

"Deceived me?"

"Yes, for you aided me to escape from the gallows, and was to marry Irma Enders; but we arranged it so that she was to run away with me, which she did, and a flooding stream helped the belief that she was dead."

"Irma is now the Queen of the Sioux, Edmund Allyn."

"Had I the strength, Douglass Dean, I would kill you where you stand; but you see that I am dying. Still I have my revenge, for you were honored and respected once, and I ruined you, for it was I who killed old Massey and robbed him, writing the words that criminated you, for I told him I was Douglass Dean, and—Good God! Fred, my brother!" and the eyes of the dying man fell upon Fred Forrester, who, just then, drew nearer.

"Yes, Edmund, your step-brother, whom you ruined in fortune."

"But you are dying, and I forgive you. I would now ask you to say here, before Buffalo Bill, Surgeon Powell, and these gallant soldiers, if I am guilty of the charges preferred against me as regards the money intrusted to me by Captain Kennerley when dying."

"You are not guilty! I swear it as a dying man!"

"Did you not give to me on the prairie, one day when we met, five thousand dollars you owed me?"

"I did."

"Did not your men halt and rob me, and take those saddle-bags with the treasure in them to you, and you return them to me unopened, saying that you had wronged me enough without letting me be regarded as a thief by my brother officers?"

"It is true what you say, as Heaven may have mercy upon my sinful soul!"

"God bless you, sir!"

The words were not uttered by Fred Forrester, but by Kate Kennerley, who had heard all, and came and bent over the dying man.

"That prayer from your sweet lips, Miss Kennerley, is a balm to my sinful soul and now suffering mind; but let me beg your forgiveness, too, and tell you no longer to trust the woman you know as Miss Meserole—she is a fiend in angel's form as Fred here can tell—"

He gasped for breath, a red stream broke from between his lips, and a moment after Edmund Allyn was dead.

A silence fell upon all, broken at last by the command of Buffalo Bill:

"Sergeant, detail a squad to hang that man, Snow Face, the Renegade."

"Yes, sir!"

"One moment, Cody. I expect death, deserve it; but I beg you to let me be shot. I was sentenced to die upon the gallows once, when innocent, and you heard that man there, now dead, say that he was guilty, but put the crime upon me. That act broke my heart, my life; it embittered me and made me what I am, so have mercy and let me be shot to death."

"Let it be as he asks, Cody," interposed Fred Forrester, to whom the scout turned.

"So it shall be!" he answered.

"I thank you both, and now would ask for paper and pencil to write a line to my wife. Will you see that she gets it, Buffalo Bill?"

"I will, sir."

The letter was written in a firm hand, folded up and placed in a black envelope which Surgeon Powell had in his pocket.

"Now I am ready to die, sir," and the renegade faced his executioners with a smile.

He took his position, the irons were knocked off of his wrists, and Buffalo Bill gave the order to fire.

The eight carbines flashed together, and the renegade chief had ended his lawless career.

When he had bade Buffalo Bill grant the renegade's request, Fred Forrester had turned away, and approaching Kate Kennerley, said:

"This is no scene for you, Miss Kennerley, so allow me to escort you to yonder cabin, which seems to have been your quarters."

"Thank you, and let me congratulate you that the cloud is lifted from your life."

"In part, yes, for I no longer need be a social outcast; but a shadow yet remains."

"Where, may I ask, is your late companion, Miss Meserole?"

"I have not seen her since the coming of Buffalo Bill and his Boys in Blue."

"Indeed! Where can she be?"

"I do not know."

Search was at once made for the missing woman, but she was nowhere to be found.

The soldiers were sent out on the search, but the report came, after awhile, that one of the outlaws had seen her take her two horses and ride away down the canyon right after the Boys in Blue came upon the scene.

"And I have a package she gave me to keep for her, saying it was most valuable and she feared Captain Brimstone would search her," remarked Miss Kennerley.

"Will you let me see the package?" Forrester asked.

Kate took it from the folds of her dress, unwrapped it, and the money-packages belonging to herself and the Government, with Buck Brewer's watch and gems were revealed!

"This tells the story," cried Surgeon Powell, "and it will do much to make the paymaster well."

Buffalo Bill was about to send a party in pursuit, when Forrester whispered:

"Let her go, Bill, for my sake; but, let her be followed to see that no harm befalls her."

CHAPTER LIV.

CONCLUSION.

UNTIL the following day the Boys in Blue remained in the canyon, and Kate Kennerley slept that night without fear, with the brave defenders surrounding her.

She had heard from Cody just what Fred Forrester had told him about his duel, and going in pursuit of her kidnappers, and it was a great joy to her to feel that she owed her rescue to the young officer, in a great measure.

It pained her to feel that her beautiful companion had been such a wicked woman, and yet she did not know just what the daring schemer was to Fred Forrester.

The next day the whole party started upon the return to the fort. Kate noticed that there were no prisoners along, and had to shudder at the answer to her question regarding them:

"They were hanged last night, for Buffalo Bill had his orders to bring no outlaw prisoners to the fort."

Soon after leaving the canyon the party came upon Captain Hazard and his company, dismounted and searching for the trail of Fred Forrester. They gave cheer after cheer at the scene, though regretting that they had not had a hand in it.

Surgeon Powell suggested that the party all go for the wounded paymaster, and this was done, for, taking slow marches, he was able to stand the journey to the fort.

The welcome that all received pen cannot describe, and when it was proven beyond all cavil that Fred Forrester had been unjustly made a social outcast, all sought to repair their fault as much as lay in their power. But there was a reserve in the manner of the outcast officer that few could break through.

As for Burke Blackford, he obtained wounded leave and left for the East, and the duel he had fought with Fred Forrester was smoothed over so nicely by Colonel Cassidy that a reprimand was all that followed, while the gallant colonel was complimented publicly upon his daring trailing of the kidnappers of Kate Kennerley.

Several days after, the two scouts sent upon the trail of Ruby Forrester returned with the report that they had tracked her to a station on the Overland, and she had there taken the stage for the East.

Fred Forrester hoped and hoped to hear from her that she had set him free; but in vain did he hope, and thus were his lips sealed, for not yet did he dare to tell Kate Kennerley of the deep love he felt for her.

She too was forced to let no one read her soul—that the idol of her heart was he who had once been known as the Outcast Officer.

THE END.

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